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INDIA'S NORTH EAST

Identity Movements, State, and Civil Society

UDAYON MISRA

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India's North-East has been the subject of much debate and interpretations since Independence. Beginning with the earliest challenge to the nation-building process, this highly diverse and multicultural region has, through its multiple identity movements and militant separatism, thrown up several major issues that have resulted in the redrawing of the parameters of the Indian nation state and, eventually, redefined the idea of nationalism itself.

The essays and commentaries in this volume, written over three decades, throw light not only on the complex processes of the nation state's engagement with the autonomy and secessionist demands emanating from the region, but also focus on the contradictions and new equations that have been emerging both within these movements and in the State's response to them. Each one of the identity movements has been enmeshed in its own contradictions, resulting in a distinct moving away from their stated goals. On the other hand, the Indian nation state, through its policy of repression, negotiation and accommodation, has itself been passing through what may be termed as 'India's North-East Experience'.

Exploring in-depth the factors behind the rise of ethnic nationalist assertions, the role of civil society in conflict situations, the rise of exclusivist politics, and the question of citizens' rights, this volume presents an incisive, wide-angled study of India and her North-East.

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Preface

The purpose of the collection is to bring together essays written over the past two decades dealing with the sociopolitical scenario of northeast India. These essays have been selected with a focus on issues relating to identity/identity movements, the role of the state, and that of civil society. Not all of these essays are prior-published ones. Some have been revised and rewritten, others have been kept as they are because of their historical context, while some others have been specifically written for this volume. Though almost all the identity movements drew heavily on strong historical roots and tried to redraw their relationship with the Indian federation, yet each one of these struggles has been enmeshed in its own contradictions which have resulted in a distinct moving away from its stated goals. On the other hand, there is the dual role of the Indian state which has, through its policy of repression and negotiation, also embarked on a journey of experience which has been referred to as 'India's North-East Experience'. This journey, as some of the essays show, involves the redrawing of the parameters of the Indian state and the redefining of the idea of nationalism itself. In achieving this, the essays highlight the role of civil society in conflict situations and how it has tried to negotiate between the state and its armed opponents. Most of the essays happen to deal with two major models of ethno-nationalist struggle in the North-East—that of the Nagas and the Assamese. Nagaland and Assam figure prominently in the essays because these two struggles present, in many senses, the two ends of the pole as far as the Indian nation-state is concerned. While the Naga Hills was largely un-administered during the colonial rule and its inhabitants did not form a part of the freedom struggle led by Gandhi and the Congress, Assam was an active participant in the struggle for indepen-

dence and was well integrated into British India, while at the same time being an integral part of what may be termed as the Indic civilization. The essays try to delve into the question as to how Assam with its centuries-old relationship with the Indian subcontinent could give rise to a militant movement with distinct secessionist overtones. They also try to show how ethnic movements often end up in the groove of exclusivist politics, thereby giving rise to serious issues relating to citizenship rights of other communities sharing the same territorial and political space. Lastly, given the wide time span covered in the essays, it is inevitable that some repetitions of events and arguments have occurred. I humbly request the readers to bear with this and hope that, in the final analysis, this collection will be of some help in understanding the enigma that is the North-East.

Acknowledgements

This is an occasion to remember with fondness and a deep sense of respect the late Krishna Raj, editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, who not only gave space to my pieces in his journal but also kept on reminding me in his gentle, inimitable way to keep writing on issues relating to the northeastern region of the country. I would like to thank the present editor of the *EPW*, Rammanohar Reddy, and all the editors and publishers of journals and collections where my articles initially appeared. There have been many friends who have, over the years, reacted to my pieces; my sincere thanks to all of them. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the faculty and staff of the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, for providing me a fine academic environment and helping me in diverse ways to prepare the manuscript. A special word of thanks to Tilottoma for painstakingly going through whatever I have written and adding the necessary critical inputs; to Sanghamitra and Rahul for taking special care in reading parts of the manuscript and suggesting certain changes; to Arindam for always being an avid reader of my articles; and to Jaya for her interest in and encouragement to my work. Finally, my thanks to Oxford University Press for kindly agreeing to bring out the collection of essays.

Udayon Misra
Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Shimla
September 2014

Chapter 1

NORTHEAST INDIA
Roots of Alienation

I Introduction

The collection opens with an essay which tries to trace the early roots of the alienation of the northeastern region from the rest of India. Beginning with different perceptions about freedom and autonomy among the nationalities of the northeastern region, the discussion moves to more substantive political and economic issues which added to the growing divide between mainland India and this region. The years immediately preceding partition and independence of the country were marked by undivided Assam's struggle to keep out of the grouping scheme of the Cabinet Mission. The years immediately following independence were marked by demands from the northeastern region for political and economic autonomy and a true federal dispensation of powers, as was reflected in the Constituent Assembly debates. But even as Assam and the northeastern region succeeded in scuttling the Cabinet Mission's grouping scheme, certain post-independence developments set the stage for the northeast's confrontation with the Indian nation-state whose initial approach to the region was marked by a highly centralist approach based on security concerns and a monocultural integrationist discourse. Notwithstanding this, initially the Nehruvian approach towards the ethnic nationalities of the northeastern region was marked by a policy of minimum interference in their custom, beliefs, and their traditional institutions, while at the same time initiating development programmes aimed at empowering them. The Nehru–Elwin emphasis was on the need to create conditions whereby the small ethnic communities would be encouraged to grow according to their own genius. Though this policy did raise a lot of controversy

and was seen by many as a continuation of some critical elements of the earlier colonial policy of isolating the tribes, yet in the long run it would have appeared to have provided dividends for the ethnic communities by protecting their land and culture from inroads from the plains. In sharp contrast to the experience of tribal areas in other parts of the country where state programmes and corporate interests have combined to displace them from their habitats, in the northeast the different tribal communities which were covered by the Sixth Schedule took full advantage of the constitutional provisions to defend their culture and lifestyle.[1] This, along with different forms of protests, both peaceful and armed, gave their identity struggles a new edge. The process of empowerment was speeded up with the creation of new geopolitical spaces for some of the major ethnic nationalities and all this helped in the rise of an educated, affluent middle class[2] which started demanding its share of political and social power. This fast emerging 'tribal' middle class became a major buyer of consumer goods produced in the Indian market. Soon, large numbers of tribal youth started moving out to the different cities of the country in search of better education and jobs.

It is significant that this emerging 'tribal' middle class's perceptions about the Indian State have been distinct in important ways from those of their compatriots who had earlier questioned their very relationship with the Indian Union. This is a new generation of tribal youth who would not only resist the stereotyping of the ethnic communities of northeastern India but, more importantly, demand its rightful share in the nation-building process as Indian citizens. The simultaneous demonstrations and protests in different Indian cities by thousands of students from the northeast, asking for justice in the recent deaths in unnatural circumstances of two students from Meghalaya and Manipur,[3] can be seen as a materialization of such a claim on the state. These deaths became an occasion for the articulation of anger and disappointment against continuing racial stereotyping of people from the northeastern part of India by communities from the mainland. Coordinated protests, supported by students from across the country, were held in the national capital and several major cities, and demands were raised for proper enquiries into the incidents and punishment for the guilty. The matter also figured in the Parliament where members expressed their concern at the discrimination being practiced against the students from the northeastern region and called for steps not only

to ensure better police protection but also for a change in the mindset.[4] One may recall that some years ago when the name of a prominent tribal politician from the northeast came up for an important national post, a front-ranking national daily commented that the said person was not fit for the post because his Mongolian features were unacceptable to the 'Indian peasant'! The manner in which the protests were coordinated through Facebook and other internet facilities along with the wide media coverage it secured reflected, surely, the extent to which these students from the northeast had been able to integrate themselves into mainstream 'Indian civil society' and in turn, also successfully evoke responses from it. The protests were significant, however, also for revealing the many complexities of the cultural practices of sections of this civil society, particularly its mono-cultural discourse as well as the enduring persistence of racial difference in the apparently 'global cosmopolitanism' of Indian cities.

With the northeastern tribal middle classes no longer confined to their villages or tribes but moving into broader urban spaces in the mainland where their presence has come to be increasingly felt, their alternate nationalism and culture seem to pose a direct challenge. The idea of the 'tribal' in the average Indian imagination had always been that of the impoverished and 'backward' subaltern who belonged to the fringes of society. It was this image that was now being directly challenged by the 'northeastern tribal' who seemed to be substantially socially, and politically empowered. Mainland India and the Hindi-Hindu heartland represented in India's power structure did not seem much concerned about the region as long as the 'colourful' tribes of the northeast were fixed in their exotic locales providing the occasional excitement to the ecotourist or the anthropological researcher. Even when the Indian state had to fight the 'secessionist tribal' of the northeast, the binaries were quite clear—the nationalist Indian versus the treacherous tribal. Earlier attempts by the Indian nation-state in the immediate post-independence years to 'integrate' the northeast into the Indian 'mainstream' were viewed with antagonism and distrust by the region as a whole and the hill areas in particular. What ensued was not only a political confrontation but, in certain senses, a clash of cultures which, despite major changes and the widening of the parameters of the Indian nation-state and the gradual acceptance of alternate nationalisms, continues in some form or other till the present day and gets

manifested in racial and cultural stereotyping of the inhabitants of the northeast.

Thus, the presence of these people from the margins in the heartland of India and their demand that they be treated as equal citizens of the country pose a challenge to all those who have long been accustomed to seeing only the dominant version of Indian culture. Although it can hardly be expected of a predominantly feudal Indian middle class to understand and appreciate a culture and lifestyle built on the tenets of tribal egalitarianism, and rooted in radically different forms and relationships of production,[5] yet one had hoped that the growth of the post-1990s Indian middle class would eventually take within its fold the fast-growing segment from the northeastern region and be instrumental in putting an end to the India-Northeast divide. But this too has been a painfully slow process, with the Indian middle class yet to move out of its narrow caste-race equations into a truly liberal urban space. This is unfortunately true not only in relation to the hill nationalities but also to other nationalities like the Assamese or the Manipuris who have been exposed to the culture and civilization of mainland India for centuries. Therefore, old mindsets and perceptions continue to hold sway and there seems to be little space for plurality of cultures and alternate nationalisms. Such mindsets emphasize the continued relevance of the issue of alienation of regions such as the northeast from the rest of the country. But the issue today is not just one of alienation. It goes much beyond that. It involves the exercise of the Constitutional right of the northeastern indigenous communities to be accepted as Indians on equal grounds, without being 'integrated'. For, only in such acceptance lies the future health of the Indian polity. This is succinctly summed up in the following lines of a young Mizo poet where she asks: 'What does an Indian Look Like?':

You look at me, and you see
My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith.
You dissect my past, analyse my present
Predict my future and build my profile.
I am a curiosity, an 'ethnic' specimen.
Politics, history, anthropology, your impressive learning,
All unable to answer the fundamental question—
"What does an Indian look like?"
—An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me.[6]

Notes

1. Each of the Sixth Schedule states of the northeastern region has strict laws aimed at preventing transfer of land to non-tribals. This schedule provided for a constitutional status to traditional institutions and customary laws, and so on.

2. Most of the major tribal communities of the northeastern region, especially in the hills, were exposed to modern education because of the efforts of the Christian missionaries. Their knowledge of the English language gave them a lead over their compatriots in other parts of the country.

3. Two students from the region, Richard Loitam from Manipur and Dana Sangma from Meghalaya, died in mysterious circumstances in Bangalore and Gurgaon respectively in April–May 2012. It was alleged that they were victims of racial/regional discrimination.

4. Delhi police had issued an advisory in 2007 entitled 'Security Tips for North-East Students/Visitors in Delhi'. It suggested that girls from the northeastern region avoid wearing 'revealing dresses' and that 'smelly food' should not be eaten in their lodgings.

5. The essay 'Who "Owns" India: The Meaning of "My" in "My Country" (Section IV of this chapter) tries to address some of these issues.

6. Cherry L. Chhangte, 'What Does an Indian Look Like', in Tilottoma Misra (ed.), *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India (Poetry and Essays)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 76.

II The Growing Hiatus

Tracing Some of the Early Causes*

Somehow, the northeastern region of India continues to be quite an aberration and an enigma, not only to policy planners and administrators stationed in the capital but also to a large mass of politicians and

* This essay is a revised version of a lecture entitled 'Independent India: The Northeast Since Independence' organized by the India International

well-meaning citizens throughout the country. It has been conveniently dubbed as the 'Northeast', an umbrella connotation[1] which tends to wipe off its immense diversity of history, culture, and politics. It was the frontier region of colonial India and despite strong cultural links which states like Assam, Manipur, and Tripura shared with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, the feeling seems to have persisted that it is a sort of an appendage to India's body politic, that it is inhabited by people who are not part of the great Indian tradition. This, in turn has given rise to a persistent feeling of neglect and alienation among the different nationalities of the northeastern region, often encouraging them to deny their claims of Indianness and reaching out to the culture and civilization of South-East Asia. That this feeling persists not only among those nationalities which weren't a part of the national movement but also among the people of the Brahmaputra Valley which has had centuries of interaction with what may be broadly termed as the Indic civilization and which took an active part in the freedom struggle,[2] should naturally be of concern to the Indian nation-state and its nation-building process. Any attempt to trace the roots of such alienation would, therefore, involve a study of perceptions on both sides of the divide and the milestones of history which helped to shape such perceptions.

When, on the eve of independence, several ethnic organizations demanded that on the departure of the British they be allowed to decide their own political futures, this was seen by many as a reaction to the uncertainty about the northeastern region that was prevailing as a result of the Muslim League's claims for it to be included in Pakistan. But, when in the year immediately following independence, ethnic nationalities like the Nagas demanded complete autonomy/independence, the all-India national leadership cutting across party and

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Centre (IIC) and the New India Foundation as part of the 'Independent India' series of lectures at the IIC, New Delhi, in February 2006. Since the period covered in the article stops in the 1950s, the northeastern region referred to here relates primarily to the undivided province of Assam which then included the present states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Though the term 'North-East' came into accepted use only after the reorganization of undivided Assam through the Northeastern Areas (Reorganization) Act of 1971, yet for the purposes of this article, India's 'North-East' refers primarily to undivided Assam.

ideological lines seemed convinced that such moves were the result of machinations by foreign agents, especially the Christian missionaries, and did not have the full backing of the people. Fresh from the freedom struggle followed by a traumatic Partition which virtually subverted the earlier plan of a loose federal set-up for the nation and substituted in its place a quasi-federal system with a strong central government, it was natural for the all-India leadership to nourish such feelings. Hence, one of the earliest challenges to the nation-building process which came in the form of the Naga resistance was initially attempted to be tackled as a law and order problem instead of as a political issue.

Those who had taken over power from the British at Delhi and were immersed in the streams of Indian cultural nationalism, were, therefore, not in a position to acknowledge, let alone try to understand and appreciate the different strands of alternative nationalism that were present in the northeastern part of the country—the greater portion of which had seen only a brief period of colonial rule lasting less than a century while large swathes were beyond the parameters of colonial control. Therefore, the Naga demand for self-rule was seen as a secessionist demand aimed at weakening the newly emerging Indian nation-state, without taking into consideration the all-important fact that the Nagas, like most of the other hill nationalities, were never a part of the freedom struggle and hence their perceptions about freedom and independence could be at variance with that of the rest of the country. Here, it would perhaps be no exaggeration to state that barring the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, the rest of the northeastern region was, in many ways, not psychologically prepared to be a part of the Indian nation. Hence, as a start of our discussion, it is necessary to find out how some of the ethnic nationalities of the northeastern region reacted to the coming of independence and what their reactions were on the 15 August 1947.

For the Assamese of the Brahmaputra Valley, Independence Day brought a sense of joy mixed with relief—joy over the fact that the British had finally been forced to leave through a struggle in which they had actively participated under the leadership of Gandhi. There was relief because Assam had finally succeeded in remaining a part of India despite those uncertain days of the Cabinet Mission Plan, but for the resistance put up by the Assam Congress and the support it received from Gandhi, when the province could have ended up as a part of Pakistan. There was a feeling of satisfaction that the Assamese, with the support

of their hill neighbours, had successfully resisted what many saw as a betrayal by the central Congress leadership. To this sense of relief was added a sense of satisfaction, especially for the Assamese middle class which formed the core of the leadership of the Assam Congress,[3] that finally, with the separation of Sylhet, there would be a homogeneous homeland for the Assamese. (That this feeling would soon be disrupted by the assertion of identities of the different tribal nationalities both in the hills and plains of Assam is, however, quite a separate matter.) But even as the Assamese celebrated Independence Day, there was a feeling that the region still did not figure in the national imagination as it should have. This was reflected in the debate centred on the national anthem in which the northeastern region did not figure at all, while more or less all the other regions of the country were represented. It is significant that the Assam Congress had even adopted a resolution,[4] saying that the name of Assam be included in the national anthem '*Jana Gana Mana*' and that the Assamese national song '*O Mor Aponar Desh*' be the second anthem. There were suggestions from the Assamese intelligentsia that that the word 'Kamarupa' be inserted in place of Sind which had gone to Pakistan. There were instances in the state of the national anthem being sung with the word 'Kamarupa' in place of 'Sind' and, on 1 July 1948, there were noisy scenes during the inauguration of the All India Radio, Shillong, with demonstrators insisting that '*Bande Mataram*' be broadcast instead of '*Jana Gana Mana*' (Barooah 2011, 431–32). The feeling of their region being left out in the national anthem seems to have persisted in the Assamese mind till today.[5] Nonetheless, 15 August 1947 was widely celebrated throughout the Brahmaputra. Although the Barak Valley, which too had contributed significantly towards the freedom struggle, witnessed Independence Day celebrations, yet the mood there was one tinged with anger and frustration over the separation of Sylhet and the transfer of some *thanas* of the Karimganj district to Pakistan.[6] Moreover, Independence Day festivities were already being marred by the flow of refugees from the newly-created East Pakistan into the Barak Valley. But what would affect the overall psyche of the Barak Valley people in the years to come would be the fact that they were now finally a part of an Assamese-majority province, the separation of the populous Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet having radically altered the demographic balance in favour of the Assamese. The feeling

seemed to be there that the Barak Valley would have to live on as an unwelcome part of the state of Assam.[7]

In the then Naga Hills district of Assam, the Naga National Council (NNC) had already observed its independence day one day prior to 15 August 1947. The NNC's position was quite clear that—(a) the greater part of the Naga territory was never ruled by the British; (b) that the Nagas had always existed as an 'independent' community; (c) that they had never been a part of 'India'; and, (d) that their right to voluntary union with India be accepted by the new rulers of the country. It was in accordance with this viewpoint, that the NNC held its own independence day celebrations on 14 August 1947. Thus, 15 August 1947 carried with it strong apprehensions among the Nagas about their status in the newly-independent Indian federation. For their part, the Nagas had never been a part of the freedom struggle which in any case could not make any inroads in the Naga Hills because of regulations like the Inner Line Regulations which prevented the entry of non-Nagas into the region. Hence, for the average Naga India's Independence Day did not carry much significance, while among the conscious and educated sections the day was marked by doubts and apprehensions about their status in a newly-independent India.

Similarly, in the other hill districts of Assam, Independence Day didn't seem to carry any significance for the people. Here one may take the instance of the Lushai Hills,[8] or of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which too were virtually untouched by the freedom struggle. It is significant that although the Khasis under U. Tirot Sing[9] and the Jaintias under U. Kiang Nongbah[10] had put up strong resistance to the British during its early phase, yet neither the Khasi-Jaintias[11] nor the Garos were drawn into the different phases of mass agitations which marked India's struggle for independence. The lone Khasi leader who consistently espoused the region's cause and opposed the Muslim League's demand for inclusion of the northeastern region in Pakistan was James Joy Mohan Nichols-Roy.[12] Though a sizable middle class had emerged among the Khasis, not many of them seemed attracted by the Congress-led freedom struggle. Thus, although Shillong was the capital of undivided Assam and was frequented by national leaders of the Congress and other parties, and where many an acrimonious debate on

the future of the region took place in the Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA) situated there, yet the freedom struggle simply bypassed the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It remains a riddle as to why the Khasis and the Jaintias, easily amongst the most advanced of the hill tribes and there being no Inner Line restrictions, were never drawn into the freedom struggle. Hence, one couldn't expect any degree of enthusiasm for 15 August 1947 amongst the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills which constitutes modern-day Meghalaya. When it came to the North East Frontier Agency (present-day Arunachal Pradesh), the greater part of it was Un-administered Territory on the eve of India's independence and for the different tribes inhabiting the region it meant little whether it was the Indian Tricolour or the Union Jack which flew in the district headquarters. As for Manipur[13] and Tripura, they were both princely states when Indian independence came. Therefore, while dealing with the perceptions about India and Indian nationalism as they emerged out of the struggle against British colonial rule, it needs to be remembered that one is dealing largely with a region, a major part of which remained in the periphery of that freedom struggle and nourished its own perceptions of freedom and independence which were naturally at odds with the then given parameters of the emerging nation-state. In such a situation, it was natural for the Indian nation-state to make mistakes born out of its lack of acquaintance with, or its unwillingness to accept the existence of the several rungs of alternate nationalism that marked the northeastern region of the country. Each wrong perception, each wrong move added to the existing divide between the nation-state and its small nationalities, many of whom were in the process of defining and redefining their identities.

While tracing the roots of alienation one may begin by referring to the immediate years before Partition and independence when a cloud of uncertainty seemed to have enveloped the northeastern region in the form of the Cabinet Mission Proposals.[14] The moment the Cabinet Mission proposals were made known, the Assam Congress leadership informed the Congress high command that the grouping scheme was not acceptable to the people of the province because Bengal, with its majority members, would impose its will on Assam. Within three days of the announcement of the Cabinet Mission proposals, the Assam Congress submitted a memorandum opposing the grouping scheme. The concluding part of the memorandum makes interesting reading

because it refers to the theme of betrayal by the all-India leadership, a refrain to be commonly heard in the post-independence discourse involving the Assam-India relationship. Urging upon the Congress Working Committee to try to understand the situation in Assam, the memorandum declared:

> If the Working Committee do not stand up to safeguard them against the operation of these sinister proposals then Assam and her people will be compelled to think that the Working Committee in their anxiety to think of larger provinces have given this small province the go by. *It will not be a surprise if many in Assam will consider it to be a great betrayal.* (Emphasis mine; quoted from the memorandum submitted by Gopinath Bardoloi to CWC, Delhi, 19 May 1946, APCC Papers, 1946 and referred to A.C. Bhuyan III, 347)

As subsequent events proved it, the Assam Congress leadership rightly anticipated that in the face of the Muslim League's persistent demand for an independent Pakistan, the Cabinet Mission might concede a Muslim-dominated zone within a united India (Bhuyan III, 342). While mass protests took place in the province, the Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA), in an unprecedented move, resolved against joining the section and declared that the Provincial Constitution could be framed only by Assam's own representatives (Guha 1977, 311). The Assembly asked all the ten representatives in the Constituent Assembly[15] to stay out of the Section when the Provincial Constitution would be drafted, but asked them to participate in the framing of the Union Constitution. The Assam Congress leaders pointed out to the central Congress leadership the vagueness in two of the clauses of the Cabinet Mission Plan. While Clause 15(5) stated that the provinces could be free to form groups, Clause 19(V) contradicted this by specifically directing the provinces to form groups. Initially, the central Congress leadership tried to assure the congressmen from Assam by saying that, if they so wished, the provinces could later opt out of the sections. Meanwhile Lord Pethick-Lawrence, at a press conference, declared that the provinces weren't actually free as mentioned in Clause 15(5). Initially, Nehru and Azad too seemed quite sympathetic towards Assam's stand and Patel was unequivocal in his support to the Assam Congress leadership.[16] But when they met the Cabinet Mission on June 10, 1946, they did not raise the issue of Assam's objection to the grouping. Interestingly, by the time the Assam Assembly passed a resolution against the grouping

scheme, the attitude of the central Congress leadership had undergone a major change. Nehru clearly expressed his unhappiness over the wording of the ALA resolution, though he was one of those who had suggested that the Assam Congress take such a step. On August 10, 1946 Nehru declared: 'We are perfectly prepared to, and have accepted, the position of sitting in sections which will consider the question of formation of the groups.' (Tara Chand 3, 485–86). Though Nehru soon wrote to Gopinath Bardoloi,[17] saying that Assam would not be forced to do anything against its will, yet it was becoming clear that the central leadership was about to let Assam down. Assam's apprehensions were further strengthened by the British government's statement of 6 December 1936 which clearly seemed to favour the Muslim League's position on the disputed clauses by declaring that issues in dispute could be resolved by a simple majority in the sections. The provision for reference to the Federal Court seemed unconvincing and Gandhi was soon to declare that it was a packed court.

The die was finally cast and Assam decided to stay away from the groupings and fight the All India Congress Committee, if necessary. It was at this crucial moment in the province's history that Gandhi came to its assistance,[18] and virtually asked the Assam Congress to revolt against the central leadership. Gandhi's stand finally tilted the scales in favour of Assam. Nehru and Azad, however, continued to hold the view that Assam's stand was helping the Muslim League and also acting as an obstruction to the transfer of power from British hands. Nehru, in reply to their question as to why Assam was being let down after being given such high hopes, is reported to have told a three-member delegation from Bengal: 'Assam could not hold up the progress of the rest of India and support to Assam would mean refusal to accept the British Prime Minister's statement of December 6 and letting loose the forces of chaos and civil war' (in *Transfer of Power* IX, 510). Even Sardar Patel, otherwise known for his consistency of views, echoed Nehru's position and in reply to a question as to whether Congress's change of stand was not a climb-down on its part, said:

> ... but for the good of the people of India, principles have sometimes to be swallowed for the sake of expediency. In a political game compromises have to be made, and in India the Congress prestige will not suffer more than it has already suffered by entering the Interim

> Government ... Surely, the whole of India cannot be plunged into civil war because of Assam.[19] (*Transfer of Pow*er IX, 509)

In the light of all this it was but natural that at the All India Congress Working Committee meeting of 5 January 1947, Nehru's resolution of accepting the general terms of the British statement of 6 December 1946 regarding the Cabinet Mission proposals was accepted by 99–52 votes. Six of the eight Assam members voted against, while the Assam Congress chief Tayyebulla voted for the motion, Assam's demand for the outright rejection of the 6 December statement was supported by Jayaprakash Narayan, Shyamaprasad Mookherjee, Saratchandra Bose, and several other leaders (Bhuyan III, 85). Nehru said that though he was 'alive to the danger that confronts Assam', yet he would still recommend the resolution for acceptance. Referring to Assam's uncompromising stand, Nehru stated:

> It is true that Assam has a mandate to oppose Sections and Groups and Assam can fight if it wants. But I would like to remind you that battles are not won by personal courage of one or two but by the cooperation of many thousands and by mobilization and the right use of resources. The time may come when Assam will have to fight: that fight will not be single-handed but will be waged by the whole of India behind them. (Gopal 1984, 42)

Nehru's rhetoric did not at all convince the Assam leaders who felt let down by the central leadership.[20] It only helped to further the divide between the region and the rest of the country.

Maulana Azad's views on the issue are recorded in his memoirs and may be worth quoting:

> Both Congress and the Muslim League had originally accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan which meant that both accepted the Constituent Assembly. So far as the Congress was concerned, it was still in favour of the Cabinet Mission Plan. The only objection raised from the Congress side was from certain leaders from Assam. They were possessed by an inexplicable fear of Bengalis. They said that if Bengal and Assam were grouped together, the whole region would be dominated by Muslims. Gandhiji had initially accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan ... however Gandhiji's views changed and he gave support to Bardoloi. Jawaharlal agreed with me that the fears of the

> Assam leaders were unjustified and tried hard to impress them. Unfortunately they did not listen to either Jawaharlal or me, especially since Gandhiji was now on their side and issued statements supporting their stand. Jawaharlal was, however, steadfast, and gave me his full support. (Azad, 184–85)[21]

Though all through the tussle between Assam and the central leadership of the Congress on the grouping issue, Maulana Azad at no point deviated from the official line or expressed his individual position regarding the Cabinet Mission proposals, yet he seemed to have sympathy for Jinnah's position.[22] For, in his memoirs he writes:

> Looking back after ten years, I concede that there was force in what Jinnah said. The Congress and the League were both parties to the agreement, and it was on the basis of distribution among the Centre, the Provinces and the Groups that the League had accepted the Plan. Congress was neither wise nor right in raising doubts. It should have accepted the Plan unequivocally if it stood for the unity of India. Vascillation would give Jinnah the opportunity to divide India. (Azad, 185)[23]

Though there is a viewpoint which maintains that the acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals would have prevented the division of the country, yet Assam's fears were totally justified.[24] The Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League, the subsequent communalization of the politics of the region, the consistent demand for inclusion of Assam and the northeastern region in Pakistan,[25] and the demographic changes that were being triggered off by continuous immigration from the then East Bengal all added to the apprehension that the grouping provision of the Cabinet Mission Plan would eventually lead to the region's inclusion in Pakistan. This apprehension was not confined just to the valley regions but was also shared by hill leaders like J.J.M. Nichols-Roy who declared:

> We know what the policy of the Muslim League is in Assam. Even now the Muslim League in Bengal wants to send thousands upon thousands of immigrants into Assam. That is feared by everyone. The people of the hills are afraid of the immigration and say they will fight it to the last. The people of the plains do not want to be swamped. They do not want Assam, which is a non-majority province now, to be turned into a Muslim-majority province. This is the crux of the fight between Assam and the Muslim League. (Bhuyan III, 384)

Therefore, it would be a simplification to suggest, as Maulana Azad does, that Assam's reservations regarding the Cabinet Mission Plan were primarily because of its 'inexplicable fear of the Bengalis'.[26] The role played by a section of the top leadership of the national Congress contributed in no small measure towards widening the gap between the Centre and Assam, although the centrifugal and separatist forces couldn't make much headway in the state because of the stand taken by the Assam Congress led by Gopinath Bardoloi.[27] The central Congress leadership's highly ambivalent approach to the issue of grouping drove a major wedge between the northeastern region and the rest of the country. Though Mahatma Gandhi's unequivocal support helped to bridge the trust deficit between the undivided Assam and the newly emerging Indian nation-state, yet the sense of uncertainty and apprehension regarding the region's future, especially in the light of repeated assertions on the part of Jinnah and the League that Assam was legitimately a part of Pakistan, would eventually fructify into different strains of autonomist/secessionist movements. The sense of betrayal would eventually assume new dimensions in the post-independence years and would come to form a dominant strain in the discourse of 'colonial' exploitation of the northeastern region by the Centre (India). As already mentioned, the one man who recognised the legitimacy of the region's apprehensions was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.[28]

Another major cause of alienation may be traced to the manner in which the country's new leadership reacted to the federalist demands made by the Assam members in the Constituent Assembly. It is significant that right from the beginning, the Congress party in Assam, along with other tribal communities and political formations, had harboured strong autonomist sentiments and many of them were not even averse to the idea of a sovereign *Swadhin* Asom. This, despite the fact that the Assam Congress supported the policies and programmes of the all-India leadership at every step. These autonomist tendencies became clear during the Constituent Assembly debates on Centre-state relations and the sharing of powers. Even prior to this, Gopinath Bardoloi, in his discussions with the Cabinet Mission, had wanted the Centre's powers to be restricted to defence, foreign relations and special emergency powers together with the right to tax for these purposes. Residuary powers, he had insisted, should be with the states. He demanded the 'fullest possible autonomy' for the province so that Assam could 'utilize

its resources in its own interest' (*Transfer of Power*: Vol VIII, 77–8). In line with this, all the members from Assam demanded that the central list should not be made unduly long and that the powers of the states should not be reduced. Kuladhar Chaliha warned the Constituent Assembly that curtailing the powers of the states could have a 'disintegrating effect' and 'the provinces will try to break away from you' (*Constituent Assembly Debates*: VIII, 919). There was a strong unified demand by the Assam members that the right of the indigenous people be protected through Constitutional safeguards and the economic exploitation of the province put an end to. In asking for safeguards to protect the Assamese people from sociopolitical and economic exploitation by the outsiders, Omeo Kumar Das demanded that the provinces be given the right to legislate on 'migration' and 'naturalization' which should be placed in the concurrent list and not just in the central list (Phukan, 84–5). On the question of residuary powers, the members from undivided Assam were unanimous in their view that such powers should be vested in the provinces and not with the Centre. They were also critical of the Union Parliament's overriding powers regarding subjects mentioned in the concurrent list as it was felt that this would interfere with the legislative powers of the provincial governments. The Khasi leader Nichols-Roy made Assam's position clear when he said: 'We do not want any provincial power to be limited by any fundamental rights or any of its powers to be taken by the Union of India'. He insisted that the power to amend the provincial law must reside with the provincial government.

It was clear that Assam did not want the Union Parliament to extend its jurisdiction over the State legislature. Article 3[29] of the Draft Constitution which empowered the Union Parliament to redraw state boundaries was looked upon with suspicion and was strongly opposed by the Assam members who saw in this the seeds of the balkanization of the province. Article 131 relating to the appointment of state Governors was also strongly resisted.[30] This was seen as a negation of state autonomy. Insisting on an elected Governor for the states, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury asked, 'How can you expect that the governor who is selected by the Congress party will act in harmony with the ministry of the province, the premier of which belongs to another party?' (Phukan, 96).[31]

On the questions relating to the sharing of financial powers between the Centre and the states, the members from Assam repeatedly stressed

the need for economic independence and greater control over the state's resources. But once the fight to keep the residual powers with the states was lost and the rights over mineral resources going to the Centre, Bardoloi insisted that the percentage of share should be high enough to meet the needs of an economically backward state like Assam (Barooah 1990,40). During the discussion on Article 253 (Article 271 of the final draft) relating to the sharing of Union duties of excise among the states and the Centre, Rohini Kumar Chaudhury moved an amendment which wanted that 70 per cent of the excise duties on tea should accrue to the state producing it. In his intervention, Bardoloi had proposed that the petroleum- and kerosene-producing states should get 75 per cent of the exise duties collected by the central government. The drafting committee, however, did not support the amendments though they were supported by some members from Orissa and the United Provinces (Barooah 1990, 40). The arguments put forward by the members from Assam, especially on the question of the rights of the federating states over their resources were diametrically different from those of the more affluent and 'mainstream' states like Bombay and West Bengal. Referring to the debate centred around the rights of the federating states over their resources, Joya Chatterjee observes:

> The Union Powers Committee Report, following the 1935 Act, proposed that the provinces be given only the most inelastic and unfructuous sources of revenue, for example, land revenue, taxes on agriculture, sales tax and stamp duties. By contrast, the Centre would keep for itself all those sources of revenue which were likely to grow and would bring in the most returns, in other words export and excise duties, income tax and corporation tax ... The line taken by the West Bengal delegation was that the provinces had nothing to fear by signing away to the centre the right to collect India's most lucrative taxes ... West Bengal's three neighbours—Assam, Bihar, and Orissa—energetically tried to influence the Assembly to distribute revenues in ways which would bring their provinces particular benefits. Speaking for Assam, which produced such oil as India had, Gopinath Bardoloi proposed an amendment to the draft constitution which called for three-quarters of the excise duties on petroleum and kerosene to be retained by the producing state and 'not form part of the revenue of India.' Assam, like Bengal, grew tea and jute, and so, Bardoloi demanded that two-thirds of the export duties on these two primary commodities should be given to the state which grew them.

> Without exception, poor provinces asked for a system of federal finance which, as Pandit Kunzru succinctly put, would benefit them by ensuring the 'transfer of wealth from the richer to the poorer provinces'. (Chatterjee 2007, 79–80)

Bardoloi's plea for Assam to be treated as a special case in view of the colonial pattern of extractive exploitation which the province had been subjected to under the British, found little support from the central leadership of the Congress. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy summed up Assam's case in the following words: 'If the excise and export duties on tea and petroleum are added to us which give about eight crores annually from Assam alone to the coffers of the Government of India, we shall have enough resources to finance our developmental schemes all round' (*Constituent Assembly Debates* Vol. VII, 227). Another member representing Assam, Omeo Kumar Das declared:

> My province, Assam, has been the source of contribution to the central exchequer to the extent of nearly eight crore annually in the shape of excise and export duty on tea and petrol. But the subvention that was given to Assam was only rupees thirty lakhs. I do not find any change in the attitude displayed by the Central leaders. (*Constituent Assembly Debates* Vol. V, 95)

Discussing the attitude towards Assam displayed by the central leaders, Nirode Barooah says:

> By not recognizing Assam as a special case of underdevelopment in the draft Article 255 and by failing to allot it its share of export and excise duties on tea and petroleum in the draft Articles 254 and 253(2) respectively, the authors of the Draft Constitution left Assam practically on the same situation as it had been under the Government of India Act of 1935 … As far as Assam was concerned, it failed even after the imperialist era, to exercise enough economic and financial independence. The Oil Fields (Regulation and Development) Act of 1948, for example, empowered the Central Government to fix royalty for Assam which continued to remain negligible … even Bardoloi's earlier grievances which he had raised before the Cabinet Mission concerning tea-tax revenue were not redressed. The revenue continued to go to the West Bengal exchequer since the tea companies had—and still have—their offices in Calcutta, where they filed their income tax returns. With such built-in maladjustments and disparity between the Centre and the State on the one hand, and between two

> neighbouring states on the other, the joint ventures with the other states, as has been envisaged by the Bardoloi group, could hardly be realized. It is small wonder that after seeing the draft Constitution, Bardoloi contemplated resignation as the Chief Minister of Assam. (Barooah 1990, 49)

Assam lost its fight in the Constituent Assembly to secure greater financial and political autonomy for the provinces. But the issues relating primarily to the federal structure of the new polity and the nature of centre-state relations were to assume important dimensions in the years to follow. The sharp differences which marked Assam's relationship with the Centre on matters ranging from financial autonomy to refugees and influx in the immediate post-independence years would, in the decades to follow, manifest themselves in new forms of protest beginning with populist agitations[32] and finally culminating in the rise of militant separatism symbolized by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in the 1980s.[33] Thus, it may be said that the fight for the rights of the small nationalities which took on a new edge in post-independence North-Eastern India had their beginnings in the issues of financial and political autonomy which figured during the Constituent Assembly debates. The issues raised remained unresolved and were to surface in the 1980s and 90s in the agenda and programmes of many a political party or group with distinct autonomist/separatist tendencies. It would not therefore, be an exaggeration to state that the seeds of separatist movements which would overtake the region in the years to follow were embedded in the policies and prejudices of the central Congress leadership towards Assam.

The sense of alienation which was fuelled by the all-India leadership's lack of empathy and its insensitivity towards the northeastern region would soon develop its own dynamics of protest and revolt among several of the major ethnic nationalities, beginning, of course, with the Naga struggle for autonomy/independence. But before we take up that for discussion, it would perhaps be relevant to touch upon, even if briefly, two other issues that contributed towards creating bitterness and distrust in the region's relationship with New Delhi—the refugee issue and the reticence of the Centre to develop the industrial infrastructure of the region because of security considerations.

The first major confrontation between the Assam government and New Delhi during the immediate post-independence period was over

the settlement of Hindu refugees from the newly-created East Pakistan. A steady stream of refugees had been flowing into Assam ever since the Partition and, the Assam government headed by Gopinath Bardoloi, despite severe financial constraints, was doing its best to provide land and shelter to the uprooted. Of about 20 lakh refugees who entered India during 1947–50, undivided Assam had to give shelter to some three lakhs.[34] But when the state government expressed its unwillingness to continue settling refugees without limit, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Bardoloi in May 1949 saying that Assam was getting a bad name because of its narrow approach to the problem and continued: 'You say there is no further land available in Assam. This is a question of fact which can be easily determined. It is patent, however, that if land is not available in Assam, it is still less available in the rest of India'. In the same letter, Nehru threatened the Assam Chief Minister in no uncertain terms that if his state did not agree to accept the unending stream of refugees from East Pakistan and settle them on its land, then the Centre would cut off financial aid to Assam. Stating that the refugee problem was given top priority by the Indian government, Nehru concluded by saying that, 'if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam financial help (would) obviously suffer' (Barooah, 1990, 30–31). Bardoloi drew attention to the pressure on cultivable land in Assam and stated that as against the 25,000 acres fit for reclamation, there were already some 1.86 lakhs of landless Assamese peasant families whom the government had to settle. Refuting the allegation that the Assam government was soft towards the Muslim immigrants but resisted the Bengali-Hindu refugees, Bardoloi reminded Nehru of Assam's fight against the grouping scheme and how at that time several central Congress leaders had been quite uncharitable towards Assam. In reply to Nehru's threat of economically strangling Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi wrote:

> I feel extremely hurt when you say that the claims of Assam for financial help would suffer for our incapacity to help solving the refugee problem ... It will be quite easy to throttle the province of its existence by withholding the necessary help for its life and growth; but I hope it will not be done—not surely on the plea of our failure to solve this particular problem ... I am sure that if we are unable to do more, it is entirely due to the non-development of the province. A

> more developed province today might have helped better in solving the problem. (Barooah, 1990, 32)

Nehru's and the central government's prejudices and fears regarding the Assam Congress leadership seemed to be strengthened when the demand for dual citizenship was raised by organizations like the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha led by Ambikagiri Roychoudhury.[35] Reacting to this, Nehru commented in a letter to the Assam Chief Minister: 'I suppose one of these days we might be asked for the independence of Assam'. He repeated his earlier threat of cutting off economic assistance to the state by saying that 'Assam would have to be left out of consideration in our general schemes of progress' (Barooah, 1990, 33). It is to the credit of Gopinath Bardoloi that he did not wince at Nehru's words; rather, he let the Prime Minister know in no uncertain terms that Assam would not accept unfounded allegations. Refuting Nehru's allegations, Bardoloi wrote:

> You have done the people of Assam wrong in assuming that the people of Assam want dual citizenship …if some crank ventilate through press and literature, any fad of his, the blame should neither go to the people of Assam nor to the government. I could understand your bitterness about it if any responsible person had made such a statement or supported it. But as it is, we are giving undue importance to anybody who makes a statement or sends a telegram. (Bardoloi to Nehru, 24 August 1949; quoted by Barooah 1990, 33)

Nehru's outburst against Bardoloi and the Congress government in Assam just after independence was indicative of the in-built prejudice which a powerful section of the central Congress leadership harboured towards Assam and the northeastern region. As it was, Nehru was not too happy with the Assam Congress leaders having successfully won over Gandhi to their side on the question of grouping, totally bypassing the stalwarts like himself, Patel, and Azad. And, now with Bardoloi refusing to toe the Central line, it was natural for Nehru to resort to threats. Nehru's intolerance and near-total refusal to see Assam's point of view would mark the region's relationship with the Centre in the years to follow and would contribute in no small measure towards widening the gap between Assam and the rest of the country.[36] Nehru was not alone in adopting a totally partisan stand on the question of

settling the refugees in Assam. Sardar Patel, who otherwise seemed perturbed by the continued influx of Muslim immigrants from East Pakistan (East Bengal) into the region, made clear his disapproval of the Assam government's move to first settle landless indigenous peasants on the wastelands to be followed by the tea labourers. Patel wanted the surplus wasteland to be distributed on a 50-50 basis between the landless indigenes and Bengali refugees and was clearly upset when the Assam Revenue Minister, Bishnuram Medhi refused to be impressed. In a letter to Bardoloi, Patel condemned Medhi as a parochial and narrow person who did not wish to give land to 'outsiders' (Barooah 1990, 36–7). Even after the state had taken in some three lakhs of refugees, Patel, in a letter in July 1950, asked him not to fall prey to local prejudices and appreciate the difficulties of the Centre. He even interfered to get the Assam Chief Secretary, S. P. Desai, removed because the latter had refused to accept the Centre's contention that there were plenty of wastelands available in Assam and other parts of the northeastern region for refugee rehabilitation.[37]

The differences between the Centre and Assam further sharpened over the question of influx of Muslim peasants into Assam from the newly-created East Pakistan. Right from the days of the Muslim League ministries under Saadulla,[38] the opening up of the reserved belts to Muslim immigrants had been a major issue in Assam politics. Though immediately after independence some 50,000 immigrant Muslims were said to have left the state,[39] tens of thousands more kept coming over the years. It was against this background that the Assam government demanded strong measures from the Centre which included the issue of a permit system for the state. When Bardoloi raised the matter in his meeting with Nehru in July 1948, the latter tried to shirk the issue by saying that it could be discussed at the Inter-Dominion Conference (Barooah 1990, 52). Ever since the 1950s, the central leaders treated Assam's pleas for strict anti-infiltration measures with indifference. Nehru's response to a letter from a dozen of Congress Members of Parliament from Assam in the early 1960s, drawing his attention to the grave dangers posed by unchecked infiltration was, at best, lukewarm. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, in a resolution adopted in April 1964 on 'Security of the State of Assam and Pakistani Infiltration' asked for a no-man's strip of land on the Assam–East Pakistan border which would be a prohibited area for use only by the Defence Department. The Assam

Congress also brought to the notice that 'it is most unfortunate that notwithstanding the earnestness on the part of the highest authorities, the problem of infiltration has not only persisted, but got more and more complex and complicated due to the non-implementation of the steps effectively and judiciously' (Kumar 1990, 67). Thus, whenever the Assam government tried to tackle the influx from East Pakistan through measures like the PIP Scheme (Prevention of Infiltration into India of Pakistani nationals), the central government, while acknowledging the gravity of the situation,[40] started putting spanners in their implementation. The procedure adopted for the deportation of Pakistani infiltrates into Assam by the B.P. Chaliha government in 1962 was very much in line with the policy statements, enactments, and directives of the central government.[41] But in September 1964 the Centre issued fresh directives which virtually put an end to the PIP Scheme.[42] This was in the face of stiff opposition from the Chief Minister of Assam. This was one of the reasons which resulted in Chaliha falling out of favour with the Centre and being eventually replaced. It was becoming increasingly evident that pressure from the Congress's Muslim members to put on hold the detection and deportation process had worked with the Centre which, under Nehru, did not wish any questions to be raised regarding its secular image.[43] Thus, though the Assam Congress was fully aware of the influx issue, it was forced to shelve it. Moreover, in subsequent years the influx issue was further sidelined because the party's electoral fortunes got increasingly tied up with the immigrant vote banks. It is significant that in sharp contrast to the position adopted by the Assam Congress, its counterparts in Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh have been quite united and vocal on the issue of infiltration and demographic change.[44]

While the issue of influx continues to occupy a central position in the political and social agenda of the state of Assam, in the neighbouring states too illegal influx from Bangladesh is developing into a major concern. Meghalaya and Manipur have been insisting on the introduction of Inner Line Permits (ILP) and from time to time xenophobic outbursts do take place. Thus, the influx issue has contributed significantly to frustration and anger at the Centre's approach to the problem which is inextricably linked with issue of demographic change and the future status of the small nationalities.[45] Interestingly, the mood of alienation is effectively summed by the Northeastern Congress (I) Coordination

Committee in its 'Report of the General Secretaries' in the following words:

> If Delhi is not to remain distant (even foreign) in the minds of the people of this region, if they have instinctively and compulsively to feel themselves as much in the mainstream of development as their counterparts in the rest of the country, then action must match words ... The Centre's goodwill and resolve must be made manifest and plain for any one to see. We would venture to suggest that the best antidote to the burgeoning insurgency in this region would be a convinced citizenry of the North-East—convinced of the Centre's goodwill, its emphatic imagination, its capacity to convert its words into deeds—"*facta non verba*". (Misra 2000, 184)

[It needs to be noted that these are the words not of any angry students' body or of an ethnic organization fighting for autonomy, but the collective voice of the northeastern units of the Congress party which has been time and again been accused of betraying regional interests for narrow electoral gains.] This is only one such example. One could quote from numerous other representations submitted by different ethnic organization of the northeastern region since the 1940s to the present day where the issue of illegal influx from Pakistan/Bangladesh has been cited as a major factor contributing to the growing divide with New Delhi. The feeling continues to be strengthened that the Centre, in its failure to initiate strong steps to curb the influx into the northeastern region from neighbouring East Pakistan/Bangladesh, has virtually abdicated its responsibility to protect the sovereignty and integrity of the region.

Finally, the security concerns of the Centre which have been central to the New Delhi–Northeast relationship have added substantially to the trust deficit. The post-1947 approach of the Centre towards the North-East has often been coloured and framed by security considerations about the borderland. During the 1950s the region, particularly the Brahmaputra Valley, was witness to several major people's movements which demanded speedy industrialization and economic improvement of the region. One such movement was the 1957 agitation for a refinery within Assam to refine the crude produce in the state. In response to this demand, Prime Minister Nehru wrote to the then Assam Governor, Fazal Ali, that such a refinery could not be set up because of security considerations and objections by the Defence Ministry. Instead steps

were initiated to take the crude oil from the oilfields of upper Assam to the refinery at Barauni by pipeline covering some 1500 kilometers. The then Assam Chief Minister, Bishnuram Medhi, wrote to Nehru saying that if defence could protect the long and expensive pipeline which passed close to the East Pakistan border, then there was no reason why it shouldn't be able to guard a refinery within Assam.[46] New Delhi's security-oriented approach towards the northeastern region acted as a major deterrent to the investment of capital in the region and this had a far-reaching negative impact on the economy. Over the years, the region fell increasingly into the grip of an extractive economy which would eventually give rise to the idea of the region being treated as a 'colonial hinterland' of India.[47] The colonial thesis would be promoted in subsequent years by the regional forces as well as by secessionist militant outfits of the region.

Similar security concerns motivated the Government of India's actions during the early phase of the Naga insurgency. When the Naga demand for self-rule surfaced and the Naga National Council started embarking on its programme of mobilizing the people for an independent status for the Naga homeland, New Delhi looked upon it with grave suspicion as a move aimed by the borderland people with the insidious aim of challenging the nation-building process. It was this approach which led to the very first excesses and violations of human rights by the Indian security forces in the then Naga Hills district of Assam. Refusing to accept the political content of the Naga struggle, the Government of India, supported by the state government headed by Bishnuram Medhi, treated the issue as a law and order problem to be dealt with by the security forces that were given blanket powers to bring the situation under control. This approach resulted in wide scale violations of human rights in the then Naga Hills district of Assam.[48] Such acts sent the signal to the Naga masses that their way of life was not safe in the hands of the new Indian rulers and the divide thus created between New Delhi and the Naga people continued to grow, assuming frightening proportions during the height of the Naga struggle from the 1960s till the 80s. As this divide continued to grow, more and more repressive laws were brought in to contain the insurgency in the Naga Hills, the most notorious of these being the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958.[49] And even as the militant struggles spread to other regions of the northeastern region such as the Mizo Hills (Mizoram)

and Manipur,[50] New Delhi seemed convinced that the insurgency in the borderland needed extraordinary measures and that laws meant for the rest of the country were not sufficient to deal with the situation in the northeastern region. Even as wide-scale human rights violations occurred in the Naga Hills and, later on, in Mizoram, Manipur, and finally in Assam, the Centre tried to justify its actions by citing the necessity of extraordinary legislative measures to deal with the situation occurring in the borderland. It is significant that some of the earliest human rights violations including village regroupings in post-independence India occurred in the Naga Hills.[51] A little bit of moderation and genuine effort on the part of the Centre to understand the Naga mind and the demand for self-rule could perhaps have avoided the immense human tragedy that engulfed the region—a trauma and a suffering that the Naga people are yet to fully overcome.[52] Clearly, in those early post-independence years, the nascent Indian nation-state, freshly emerging from the trauma of Partition, may have been unequipped or even unwilling to tackle the demands of pluralism and the multi-ethnic nature of our polity raised by the small nationalities of the northeastern region. Its propensity to view things through a pair of quasi-federal lens with a highly centralized focal point would in the years to follow add to the growing hiatus between the Centre and the northeast. More than six decades of independence should have been sufficient to do away with set perceptions and prejudices which have marked the Centre's approach to the northeastern region. But this, unfortunately, hasn't been the case.

Notes

1. Refer to 'North-East: An Illusive Construct', in *The Periphery Strikes Back* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study [IIAS], 2000), 1–12.

2. Ever since the Congress made its formal presence in Assam in 1926 when the Assam Association merged with the Indian National Congress (INC), the people of the Brahmaputra Valley were actively involved in the freedom struggle. Both during the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements, thousands of people were arrested and amongst the first martyrs of the 1942 movement was the teenager Kanaklata Baruah who was shot dead as she advanced to hoist the tricolour on the Gohpur police station. On one single day, 20 September 1942, as many as 13 Congress volunteers

were shot dead in Dhekiajuli and Gohpur when they advanced to raise the Congress tricolour over the police stations at Dhekiajuli and Gohpur in central Assam. See Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research [ICHR], 1977) 273–7.

3. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in 1945, in its election manifesto, stated: 'Unless the province of Assam is organized on the basis of Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible. The inclusion of Bengali speaking Sylhet and Cachar and immigration or importation of lakhs of Bengali settlers on wastelands has been threatening to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam and has, in practice, caused many disorders in its administration'. Assamese public opinion was in favour of the separation of Sylhet from Assam and this is reflected in the correspondence of Assamese leaders with the all-India Congress leadership as well as in discussions with the Cabinet Mission. For instance, Bardoloi wrote to Sardar Patel on 18 February 1948: 'Maulana Sahib [e.g. Azad] seemed to come to the conclusion that the only alternative to this state of things is to separate the Bengali district of Sylhet and a portion of Cachar from Assam and join these with Bengal—a consummation to which the Assamese people are looking forward for the last 70 years'. Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945–50. Vol. VI, Ahmedabad, 1972, p. 194. Wavell records in his journal that when Bardoloi met him April 1946 he made it clear to him that he was prepared to cede Sylhet to Eastern Bengal. See Nicholas Mansergh and Panderel Moon (eds) *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power,* Vol. VII, 35, pp. 76–80).

4. For details see Nirode K. Barooah's *Gopinath Bardoloi: The Assam Problem and Nehru's Centre* (Guwahati: Bhabani Print and Publications, 2010), pp. 429–32. The Assam Governor, Akbar Hydari, had written to Nehru saying, 'we suggest that the relevant verse should be rewritten in the Hindustani translation at least, so as to include Assam and such other provinces as may have been omitted'.

5. For instance, one notices this point being stressed in TV shows and discussions in Assam even today. Interestingly, other small ethnic nationalities which did not participate in the Indian freedom struggle do not seem to be exercised over this omission.

6. The general popular mood in the Barak Valley was that the Congress leadership of Assam did not do enough to prevent the inclusion of Sylhet in Pakistan.

7. The divide between the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys has been a major marker in the post-1947 politics of the state. There have been major

differences between the people of the two valleys on several issues, that of the official language being one of the central ones. While the people of the Barak Valley have time and again accused the Assam government of continued and purposeful neglect and had also, at a point of time, demanded a separate state for themselves, opinion in the Brahmaputra Valley had often favoured the separation of the Barak Valley from Assam. However, in recent years the antagonism between the two valleys seems to have subsided to a large extent and the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys have come much closer, with earlier positions and prejudices gradually giving way to new social and cultural equations.

8. Political activity in the Lushai Hills in the immediate pre- and post-independence period was limited to two small middle-class organizations, the Mizo Union and the United Mizo Freedom Organisation. Refer S.K. Chaube, reprint, *Hill Politics in Northeast India* (Patna: Orient Longman Ltd.,1999), pp. 174–85.

9. U. Tirot Sing was the Syiem (chief) of the Khadsawphra Syeimship. After initially agreeing to the British request to build a road connecting the plains of Assam with Sylhet, Tirot Sing grew apprehensive of the British designs and got the approval of the Durbar to push the British out of his territory. After four years of guerilla warfare (1829–33), Tirot Sing and his confederacy of Khasi chiefs was defeated. Tirot Sing was captured and sent to Dacca Jail. He died in Dacca as a state prisoner on 18 July 1835.

10. U. Kiang Nongbah was a Jaintia leader who led a protracted rebellion against the British. He was finally defeated and hanged on 30 December 1862.

11. The Khasis call themselves 'Hynniewtrep' while the Jaintias are known as 'Pnars'.

12. Khasi legislator and minister. He served in the first and second Saadulla ministries (1937–8) and represented the Shillong (urban) constituency. His consistent opposition to the politics of the Muslim League drew him close to the Congress and for some time he was a member of the party which he represented in the AICC. In 1939 when some legislators formed the Assam Coalition Party to scuttle Saadulla's attempts to form a government following the resignation of the Congress ministry headed by Bardoloi, it was Nichols-Roy's name that was proposed as the leader of the coalition group. The move, however, had to be abandoned because the Central Working Committee (CWC) of the Congress did not approve it. As a member of the Constituent Assembly he played a pivotal role in projecting Assam's demand for greater financial autonomy and the rights of the provinces to their resources. Nichols-Roy was also vocal on the issue of immigration from East Bengal and the Muslim League's efforts to include

the region in Pakistan. Nichols-Roy held a ministerial berth in the Bardoloi ministry (1946–50) but disillusioned with post-independence Congress politics dominated by the Assamese middle class, he gradually veered towards the hill-state movement which stood for a separate Khasi–Jaintia state.

13. At the time of India's independence, Manipur was a princely state with a constitution and an elected Legislative Assembly of its own. Manipur's 'accession' to India two years later would become a major issue for the insurgent groups fighting for an independent Manipur.

14. The Cabinet Mission Proposals were announced in May 1946 and provided for a division of the provinces into three sections—A, B, and C. Section C was to consist of Bengal and Assam. The provinces were free to form groups with executives and legislatures, and each group could determine the provincial subjects to be taken in common. In Section C, Assam would have had seven general and three Muslim members, whereas Bengal would have had 27 general and 33 Muslim members. The Cabinet Mission scheme was viewed throughout undivided Assam as a ruse to include the region in Pakistan. The struggle against the Cabinet Mission Plan succeeded in drawing in several of the hill nationalities and leaders like J.J.M. Nichols-Roy took a prominent part in thwarting the machinations of the Muslim League.

15. Though the Mughals subsequently regained Guwahati, the Ahoms finally pushed them out of Assam after the Battle of Itakhuli in 1682. But Saraighat is considered to be the decisive battle which put an end to Mughal plans of integrating the region with the Mughal Empire.

16. Of the 10 Assam representatives to the Constituent Assembly, three belonged to the Muslim League.

17. For details see Arun Ch. Bhuyan (ed.), *Political History of Assam*, Vol. III, 360–2; Nirode Kumar Barooah, *Bardoloi: The Assam Problem and Nehru's Centre*, (Guwahati: Bhabani Print and Publications, 2010), pp. 219, 218–28; Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, pp. 96–100.

18. Bardoloi (1890–1950) was a front-ranking Congress leader of Assam. He headed two ministries in 1938 and during the years 1946–51. He was the first Prime Minister of Assam in independent India and was primarily responsible for leading the movement against the grouping scheme of the Cabinet Mission. He was also the architect of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

19. Gandhi told a delegation of Assam Congress leaders: '... if Assam keeps quiet, it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not wish to do. It must stand independently as an autonomous unit. It is autonomous to a large extent today. It must become fully independent and

autonomous ... As soon as the time comes for the Constituent Assembly to go into sections, you will say, "Gentlemen, Assam retires". For the independence of India it is the only condition. Each unit must decide and act for itself. I am hoping that in this, Assam will lead the way ... If Assam takes care of itself, the rest of India will be able to look after itself' (*Transfer of Power*: IX, 403–05).

20. Nehru, however, changed his stance and declared at AICC session of 6 July 1947 and subsequently at a press meet on 10 July that the Congress decision to join the Constituent Assembly as per the Cabinet Mission Plan was not bound by any conditions and that '... we have not committed ourselves to no single matter to anybody'. This was interpreted by Jinnah as a tactical move by the Congress to alter the Cabinet Mission's scheme in the Constituent Assembly and hence, the Muslim League formally reversed its earlier acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan on 29 July 1947 and declared its programme of 'Direct Action' to achieve Pakistan.

21. Jawaharlal Nehru changed his position within just three months of the AICC resolution of January 1947. Mountbatten records that when asked about the Congress's acceptance of the 6 December statement, 'Pandit Nehru replied that of course the Congress accepted the statement, but if they were asked whether they were going to force Assam and the Sikhs to abide by it, they would have to admit that they were not in a position to force any province or section of a province to comply with all the terms against their will and interest' (in *Transfer of Power* X, 623).

22. Muhammad Ali Jinnah had insisted that the provinces first join the groups and could afterwards separate if they wished.

23. This passage belongs to that part of his memoirs which were published 30 years after Maulana Azad's death.

24. Assam's fears of being abandoned by the all-India leadership of the Congress were proved true when the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a predominantly non-Muslim area populated by some 2.5 lakhs of Buddhist tribals, was virtually gifted away to Pakistan. All the strong assurances given by leaders like Nehru and Patel to the Chakma tribals of the region proved of no avail in the face of the guile and subterfuge indulged in by Mountbatten who, while reacting to a letter from Patel, says that he was 'amazed that such a terrific crisis should have blown over so small a matter'. He even dismissed Patel's reaction to the issue as 'hysterical' and justified the allotment of the CHT to Pakistan on the ground that if there was unrestricted felling of trees in the hill tracts then Chittagong port would silt up. What was even more surprising was the subterfuge adopted by Mountbatten who decided that 'somehow (we) must prevent the (Congress) leaders from knowing the details of the Award till after August 15; all our work and hope

of good Indo–British relations on the day of the transfer of power would risk being destroyed if we could not do this'. Mountbatten was informed of the Bengal Award on 12 August 1947 and he 'deliberately refrained from reading it' because he was told by the Reforms Commissioner V.P. Menon that if he let the Congress leaders know about this, then the results could be disastrous. Thus the fate of the CHT tribals, which was ever 'so small a matter', was decided on the sly by Mountbatten and the Congress leadership was left with no option but to accept it. For details see Larry Collins and Domique Lapierre, *Mountbatten and the Partition of India, Vol. I,* 69–70; 174–5; 177–8 and Durga Das (ed.), *Sardar Patel's Correspondence,* 1945–50, *Vol. IV,* 166–7.

25. Jinnah's position is well known. Refer to *Transfer of Power* and Zaidi, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah Papers.*

26. Assam's apprehensions were added to by the move to carve out a sovereign Bengal based on Bengali linguistic nationalism by leaders such as Sarat Chandra Bose asnd Kiran Shankar Ray. This move had the active support of Muslim League leaders like Suhrawardy and Liaquat Ali Khan. The Working Committee of the provincial Muslim League has set up a sub-committee in May 1947 to carry on negotiations with Hindu leaders on the future constitutional status of Bengal. Assam was naturally apprehensive over the possibility of being included in a Bengali- and Muslim-majority Bengal. As it was, Jinnah and the Muslim League were assiduously building up the thesis that Assam was never a Hindu-majority province, once the hill tribes, the tea tribes, and the plains tribes were left out. Refer Z.H. Zaidi (ed.), *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah Papers, Prelude to Pakistan,* Vol. I, Part I. Appendices, 328, F 410/3 p. 567.

27. For details as to how the stand taken by the Assam Congress acted as a check to the proponents of an independent Assam, see *Periphery Strikes Back*, pp. 100–102.

28. There is, of course, the other viewpoint about the Cabinet Mission proposals which maintains that had the proposals been accepted, the partition of the country could have been avoided. Moreover, the Cabinet Mission had also provided for a truly federal framework with large powers to the states. Almost 40 years after independence, during a Lok Sabha debate, the historian Rafiq Zakaria held Gopinath Bardoloi responsible for the partition of the country because of his resistance to the Cabinet Mission proposals. See Nirode K. Barooah, *Gopinath Bardoloi,' The Assam Problem' and Nehru's Centre* (Guwhati: Bhabani Print and Publications), pp. 234–5.

29. It was on the strength of this Article that the reorganization of the northeastern states took place. In recent times, the Bodos of Assam and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland [NSCN(IM)] have been

insisting on the use of this Article to redraw the boundaries of Assam and Manipur for the creation of the state of Bodoland and the integration of Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur in a greater Nagalim. The Manipur Assembly has reacted by passing a resolution demanding an amendment of this Article to prevent the bifurcation of the state.

30. 'Clause 15' of the model provincial constitution gave the governors special emergency powers and was strongly opposed by a large section of the house. See Joya Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 75–6.

31. Such apprehensions were proved true in post-independence Assam and the northeast when the Centre made it a practice to appoint retired army generals, police, and intelligence officials as governors in these states. See chapter entitled 'Governors as Generals' in Sanjib Baruah's *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 59–80.

32. The first mass movement in Assam took place in 1957 for an oil refinery in the state. This demand had been initially turned down by the Centre on security considerations.

33. In the Charter of Demands prepared for the ULFA by a civil-society group and submitted by the ULFA to the central government in August 2011, these issues, particularly the rights of the states over their resources, figure in a major way. The demands of most of the other militant organizations of the northeastern region are on similar lines.

34. Subsequent waves of Bengali Hindu refugees into Assam raised the figure to almost 7 lakhs as per the 1961 Census. The Bangladesh War added another lac or so and present estimates put the figure at around 10 lacs.

35. Ambikagiri Roychoudhury (1885–1967) received his early education at Sibsagar and Guwahati. He joined the Anarchist Group in 1904 and was interned at Barpeta. He edited the Assamese journal *Chetana* from 1918. He was jailed for a year for his participation in the Non-cooperation Movement. An ardent Assamese nationalist, he supported their rights as a *jati* within the greater Indian *mahajati* and proposed dual citizenship. Though not much of a political force in his lifetime, from onwards the 1970s Roychoudhury's ideas were seen as a major influence on regional organizations like the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad and secessionist outfits like the ULFA.

36. The settlement of refugees in different parts of undivided Assam would emerge as a major area of friction in the northeastern region. For instance, the Khasis strongly resented the settlement of thousands of Bengali refugees in Shillong.

37. Desai was Chief Secretary of Assam under Gopinath Bardoloi. His persistent resistance to the centre's pressure to open up tracts of cultivable land for the refugees from East Pakistan earned him the ire of Nehru and Patel.

38. Syed Muhammad Saadulla headed, in all, five different ministries in Assam during the period April 1937 to February 1946. An Assamese-Muslim, Saadulla is seen as being largely responsible for the large-scale entry and settlement of Bengali-Muslim immigrants from East Bengal in Assam. He joined the Muslim League in 1937 and supported the grouping scheme under the Cabinet Mission.

39. Though the exact figures of the Muslim exodus to East Pakistan from the districts of Goalpara, Kamrupa, and Cachar are not known, yet conservative estimates put the figure between 80,000–100,000 people. However, most of the displaced people returned to Assam following the signing of the Nehru–Liaquat Pact. Refer Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity (*Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1993*)*, pp. 209–10.

40. The issue of infiltration from East Pakistan into Assam was frequently discussed by the Central Cabinet. As early as January 1950, the Government of India passed an ordinance which was soon replaced by the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950. But in subsequent years the centre softened its attitude towards the infiltrates.

41. A press statement issued by the Assam Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha in July1965 observed: 'It appears that in Assam the estimated figure of infiltrators during 1951–61, as shown in the Census Report of 1961, was 2,20,691. Over and above this, there have been further infiltration after 1961 … Against the total number of infiltrates till the end of June 1965, 1,22,476 infiltrators have been deported and their departure has been confirmed by the check posts. Government policy in this regard is clear and firm. It envisages deportation of all illegal infiltrates from the state and at the same time ensures any person claiming to be an Indian citizen the opportunity for representing his case before the appropriate authorities'. *White Paper on Foreigners' Issue*, 20 October 2012, Home and Political Department, Government of Assam, pp. 57–8.

42. In September 1964 the Foreigners' Tribunal Order made it mandatory that persons from the judicial service be made members of the Foreigners' Tribunals.

43. The matter came up for discussion at the joint conference of Home Ministers of India and Pakistan held in New Delhi on 7–11 April, 1964.

44. Arunachal Pradesh has adopted a united approach against the Chakma refugees and has even tried to bypass the Supreme Court observa-

tions and judgements in this regard. In Meghalaya there has been a consistent demand from organizations like the Khasi Students Union for stricter anti-immigration measures.

45. The Centre passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act in 1983 which made the detection and deportation of illegal infiltrates from Bangladesh virtually impossible because of certain restrictive clauses. The IM(DT) Act was subsequently struck down by the Supreme Court in 2005 as ultra vires of the constitution. The Supreme Court and the Guwahati High Court has time and again expressed grave concern at the continued influx form Bangladesh and its subsequent impact on the life and culture of the people of the region.

46. For full text of the letter see Bishnuram Medhi Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi. Text reproduced in Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, pp. 205–06. The unwillingness of the Centre to initiate major development projects in Assam and the gradual drying up of capital investment in Assam following independence is discussed in the essay dealing with Assam and the Partition.

47. Refer 'Assam: A Colonial Hinterland' by Tilottoma Misra, *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. XV, No. 39, 9 August 1980. Intellectuals like Homen Borgohain highlighted the exploitation of the region in the tea sector [*Aupanibeshik Soshanar Biruddhe Asomar Sesh Sangram* (Assamese) 'Assam's Last Fight against Colonial Exploitation', Guwahati, 1980]. While political activists like Nibaran Bora assiduously tried to build up the parallel between Rawalpindi's exploitation of East Pakistan with New Delhi's exploitation of Assam.

48. In one such early incident two Naga village elders were shot and their near-naked bodies were displayed at the marketplace in Kohima. This was just the beginning of a virtual rule by the army and the security forces during which the rule of law and the constitutional rights of the people stood suspended for all practical purposes. Refer W. Lasuh, *The Naga Chronicle* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2002), pp. 173–6.

49. Fifty-five years after the repressive Act was enacted, it is still in force in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and partly in Tripura. Massive public opinion against the AFSPA has not been able to change the centre's approach which is guided by the army top brass. The Prime Minister had promised a 'more human law' for the people of the northeastern region but the Home Minister declared that the government could not go against the wishes of the armed forces.

50. Refer Jaideep Saikia, *Documents on North East India* (New Delhi: Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, 2010), pp. ix–x.

51. Village regroupings were resorted to by the administration in an effort top neutralize the support bases of the militants. This resulted in a total disruption of the entire way of life of the people and had far-reaching effects on the social order. Village regroupings also took place during the Mizo struggle. Similar groupings were effected by the Americans in Vietnam.

52. The initial demand of the NNC was not for an independent Naga homeland but for an autonomous region with self-rule for the Nagas. Refer Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, 2000, p. 31.

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III Assam and the Legacy of Partition

Caught in a Time Warp*

Though the Partition in Assam[1] has not drawn the attention of scholars and historians as in the case of the Punjab and Bengal, yet the separation of the populous district of Sylhet through a controversial referendum[2] entailed a tragedy of major proportions in which thousands were killed and lakhs of displaced people moved into West Bengal and Assam as refugees. However, more than the immediate impact of the Partition and the human tragedy it involved, the focus of this essay would be to relate some of the present political develop-

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ments in Assam to the long-term effects of the Partition, and an attempt to see the present developments in the light of the past. Although the Partition did not involve any major redrawing of geographical boundaries of the erstwhile state of Assam, yet by virtually cutting off the entire northeastern region from the rest of India, it has had such a far-reaching fallout that many of the region's ills and predicaments today cannot be understood if its pre- and post-Partition history is not seriously considered. For, the Partition by turning the region into a landlocked area almost overnight with over 90 per cent of its borders facing foreign nations, not only stifled its traditional trade and commerce routes thereby throwing the economy into a tailspin, but by disrupting its links with the rest of the country (the region now being connected with the rest of the country through a tenuous 22-km strip of land referred to as the 'Chicken's Neck') prepared the ground for the growth of an isolationist mindset which nourished in its turn, separatist movements of varying shades. Yet, it is quite often forgotten that Assam was always a part of the landmass known as the Ganges–Brahmaputra basin extending across the vast plains of northern India into the Assam valley. Moreover, large areas of the Brahmaputra Valley may be said to have been a part of what is broadly referred to as the Indic civilization, although its own diversity of cultures and races has added a new mix to it. Little did the political leadership of Assam realize that the gains of independence[3] from colonial rule were soon to be nullified by a partition that would permanently alter the geographical status of the region. As Van Schendel says, it is often forgotten that the surgical operation of Partition also created a new category called the northeast. The Partition not only turned Assam and the northeastern region into a landlocked area but the politics that took shape in the years immediately before and after the Partition centred around immigration, land, identity, and language, was to have long term consequences—consequences with which the region is still grappling. While the economy was slowly strangulated and Assam kept going down in the scale of human development and overall growth, the more dramatic effects of Partition were soon to be felt in the politics that grew out of the issues centred around these core issues. Interestingly, the issues which dominated the 1930s and early 1940s continue to be so even today, more than six decades after the Partition and the coming of independence. This presentation is an attempt to understand these issues in the light of past history.

Perhaps it is because of the relatively lesser scale of the tragedy compared to western India as also the peripheral geographical position of the area concerned that the effects of the Partition on Assam and the northeastern region have not elicited the kind of attention that it certainly deserves. But, that necessarily does not deflect from the fact that the Partition radically affected the sociopolitical and economic scenario of the region in such a manner that even after six and half decades of independence, the region's problems cannot be discussed without a reference to the sudden changes in the region's geopolitics that were affected by the events leading up to 15 August 1947. The Partition and its after effects continue to be a central reference point whenever attempts are made to probe into the political and economic malaise that afflicts the region today. This article would attempt to show how, when a certain region is suddenly turned into a borderland,[4] issues of security and development take on new dimensions even as the people of the region develop a mindset tinged by apprehension and distrust of the Centre and the mainland. It would also try to discuss how the Partition, by virtually cutting off the region from the rest of the country, not only had an adverse effect on the economy of the region but also spawned various forms of identity struggles, militant as well as populist, born primarily out of a sense of relative deprivation and a feeling of neglect by the Centre and partly nourished by a feeling of separateness from the rest of the country. Quite often scholars have tended to overlook the impact of Partition and the suddenly changing geographical position on the sociopolitical scenario of the northeastern region and how it has contributed towards strengthening of the centre-periphery syndrome.[5] Therefore, the aim of this article is to try and understand some of the factors which may have contributed towards the alienation of a people who have long been nourished by the cultural streams of the subcontinent and who themselves have added in a variety of form and content towards strengthening and enlarging the greater Indian mosaic.

The purpose of choosing Assam as the focus of this essay has chiefly been motivated by the fact tha[recent questions that have been raised regarding the region's relationship with the rest of the country pose a greater threat to the nation-building process and the Indian state itself than, for instance, the long-term insurgency in Nagaland.] Why did a distinctly secessionist politics take roots in Assam? Quite often, one tends

to see this as part of or extension of the general climate of insurgency and armed revolt that has been so characteristic of the northeastern region. But a deeper analysis is bound to reveal that the course and content of armed movements in the region is distinctly different in the different states/communities. While, for instance, the armed struggle against the Indian state in the Naga Hills of undivided Assam was not the result of economic deprivation or some such reason but was motivated by the Nagas' desire to be left alone to pursue what has been termed as the Naga way of life, in Assam the reasons appear to be much more complex. No doubt, there were strong economic causes behind the rise of militancy in Assam. But issues like economic backwardness, unemployment, and a primarily extractive economy leading to a framework of colonial exploitation have been nourished by a feeling of consistent neglect and betrayal by the Centre. This compounded with the idea that, but for a brief spell of British rule, Assam has never been a part of any of the great Indian empires and that it has always had an independent existence, has led to the emergence of the idea of *Swadhin* Asom. What took shape in the form of secessionist militancy in the late 1970s or early 1980s needs to be seen against the backdrop of the pre-Partition politics which spawned seeds of suspicion and distrust about the newly emerging Indian nation-state and strengthened autonomist/separatist tendencies in the entire region. When we try to understand the present sequence of events in the light of pre- and post-Partition politics, we perhaps get a more comprehensive view of the present situation in the state. Perhaps with no other people or state of the Indian Union has history played such an ironical role. Assam, it appears, has been caught in a time warp. Quite significantly, most of the issues relating to land, ethnic rights, identity, and language which continue to figure so prominently in the discourse both of the militant groups as well as that of the Assamese civil society, were central issues in pre-1947 Assam and had been debated heatedly both on the floor of the Assam Legislative Assembly as well as in broader public space. Why is it that even after more than 60 years these very issues have remained central to the politics and society of Assam? It is exactly in order to understand this apparent riddle that one must go back to a particular period in the state's history when the very future of a small nationality along with many other smaller ones, seemed to be at stake.

It is rather strange that though it is now more than 60 years since the country was divided into two, any discussion on Assam must invariably begin by referring to the Partition. For, the immediate impact of the Partition on Assam and the northeast was that it was suddenly cut off from the rest of the country. A region which was from time immemorial a part of the continuous land mass stretching across the Gangetic plains into the plains of Bengal and spreading across to the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, was suddenly turned into a landlocked region connected to India by a tenuous stretch of 22 km of land called the 'Siliguri Corridor'. Referring to this, the Shukla Commission Report observed:

> Partition further isolated an already isolated geo-politically sequestered region. It was left with over 4,500 km of external frontier with Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh but no more than a slender 22 km connection with the Indian hinterland through the tenuous Siliguri corridor, the gateway to the Northeast. The very considerable market disruption, socio-economic distancing and retardation that resulted has not been adequately appreciated and compensated.[6]

Centuries-old trade links with neighbouring regions like East Bengal were disrupted and, in the course of time, as relations between India and Pakistan deteriorated, the river traffic along the mighty Brahmaputra which was responsible in British and pre-British days for most of the trade and commerce, stood disrupted, thereby further adding to the northeastern region's isolation. It would not be out of context to mention here that in 1963, some 15 years after Partition, as per the figures released by the Regional Transport Survey of Assam, the quantum of traffic to and from Assam was estimated to be 47.4 per cent by waterways, 46 per cent by railways, and only 6.6 per cent by roadways (Medhi, 1978). The economic cost of the disruption in water transport can be inferred from the fact that in pre-Partition days, ships carrying tea, coal, and timber reached Kolkata from Dibrugarh in eight days whereas a ship from Kolkata to Guwahati takes more than 20 days at present because of the lack of night navigation and customs formalities at various points. The rail link[7] with the rest of the country which lay disrupted from August 1947 till January 1950,[8] though much improved today, continues to be a tenuous one. The disruption of traditional trade links and the sudden geographical isolation of the region had such a negative impact on the economy that a once relatively prosperous region started

rapidly sliding down the economic scale. While in the 1950s, Assam's[9] per capita income was higher than that of India by more than 4 per cent, yet by 2000–01, it went down to almost 40 per cent below the national average. It is significant that when the growth rate of the country accelerated in the 1990s, Assam's economy went into a deceleration mode.[10] Today, in most of the indices of human development, Assam ranks very low, clubbed with the poorest states of the Indian Union.

In matters of road connectivity, irrigation, power generation,[11] the state is way down in the list of least developed states. This, despite the fact that the state produces more than half of the country's tea, has considerable reserves of oil, gas, minerals, and great hydropower potential, not to speak of its immense tourist potential made up of its rainforests, game reserves, and national parks.

Thus, the immediate post-independence years were marked by sluggish industrial and agricultural growth, an unresponsive administration, rising unemployment, and little effort being put in to develop the infrastructure of the region. The post-independence blues were multiplied by the influx of a large number of refugees from East Pakistan into the state, massive illegal infiltration accompanied by swift demographic change, recurrent floods, and an economic downslide triggered off by the disruption of traditional trade and communication routes. The 1950s and 1960s were marked by popular agitations demanding speedy industrialization but the failure of the state to address the needs of the people and develop the industrial infrastructure of the region eventually gave rise to a general sense of frustration and isolationism. Referring to the state of unrest then prevailing in undivided Assam, a document published by the North Eastern Council entitled 'NEC: A Saga of Vision, Commitment and Achievement: Glorious 35 Years of Existence' (2007) states:

> Discontentment manifested as insurgencies in different parts of the region. Mid-1960s onward we witnessed the birth of several new political entities. The economic unrest took communal hues that led to the geographical break-up of Assam State on the basis of political and community considerations. It was a massive transformation of the map, not of the country but of the State of Assam (that) stood divided into four states … Meghalaya (1972), Mizoram (1987), Nagaland (1963) and Arunachal Pradesh (1972).[12]

But the document concedes that 'the compulsions of all these enormous historical and geographical events had created a void, the chasm was too wide to be filled up by the new political identities, limited resources, technology and the framework of the time ... The voices for linking up areas and for (the) creation of basic infrastructure to strengthen social and economic systems were raised'.

The growing discontent of the people found expression in a variety of populist movements which in course of time moved into ethnic nationalist channels and took the shape of autonomist and even separatist movements.[13] But when New Delhi consistently failed to address the central grievances of the different communities/nationalities of the region, the stage was set for the rise of armed insurgency which, in the past two decades, has wrought havoc to the developmental process of the state. Even as insurgency assumed new proportions and the number of militant outfits kept multiplying, the state's troubles too multiplied because of the consistent flight of capital and the unwillingness on the part of private investors to come to the region. A vicious circle of underdevelopment-insurgency-underdevelopment took shape and the state is still struggling to get out of it. Thus, in the words of B.G. Verghese, Assam, which was a 'happening place' of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had turned into a moribund region moving towards a cul-de-sac.

Today, Assam presents a disturbed picture to the rest of the country and the world. It is always in the news for the wrong reasons—insurgency, killings, ethnic clashes, bomb-blasts,[14] and of course, natural disasters. Somehow the impression seems to have grown that the people of the region are xenophobic, anti-outsider, and intolerant to other cultures. But, the fact that is often overlooked is that Assam is the land of a wonderful mix of peoples, and in the course of history the Assamese nationality has grown by accommodating within its fold, Mongoloid, Aryan, and Tibeto–Burman streams. Though there is so much controversy over illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh today, immigration was never an issue in Assam. Over the centuries different streams of people have migrated and settled in Assam, thereby giving rise to a highly syncretic multiethnic and multilingual community. The northeastern region by itself has over 220 tribal communities out of the 600-odd tribal communities of the country; of the 325 languages listed in the *People of India* Vol IX edited by K. S. Singh in 1993, 175 com-

munities belonging to the Tibeto–Burman family reside in this region, where the Austro–Asiatic languages are also spoken. New arrivals in the form of the Lisus from southern China into Arunachal Pradesh took place around the period of India's independence. The Khamtis, for instance, entered Assam in the middle of the nineteenth century, while the Ahoms came in the thirteenth century, and the sizable tea-labour population of the state came in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Assamese Muslims who form an integral part of the Assamese nationality and who have been seen by many historians and foreign travellers as more Assamese than Muslim, came during the successive waves of Muslim invasions into the region, the last being the Mughals who were finally defeated in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671.[15] All these communities are beautifully woven into the fabric that is Assam. Small communities of just a few thousands in upper Assam have not only coexisted with the majority groups but have also retained their tradition and culture. But unfortunately, all this story of integration and peaceful coexistence of myriad communities has been superscripted by different forms of exclusivist ethno-nationalist discourse and, to understand why this actually happened, one must go back to that period of time. That is exactly why the Partition and its after effects are so important in any attempt to understand this region and its present complexities.

Contrasting Assam's present position with its recent pre-Partition past, B.G. Verghese writes:

> The Northeast suffers from a deep sense of economic neglect. Yet 100–150 years ago, the Brahmaputra Valley was the vanguard of Indian development. Its alluring and ever-expanding tea production and exports triggered a variety of investments with backward and forward linkages. The discovery of coal and oil in Upper Assam resulted in the development of mining and forestry. The coal was required to fuel the steam vessels and then the railways that brought up heavy machinery and took back tea for export. Timber was needed for sleepers and tea chests. The development of each sector provided a stimulus to the other.[16]

It is, however, a different matter that the colonial development has been rightly seen by many as being of an extractive nature with little reinvestment of profits which were generally channelled out of the region. Nevertheless, the point one would like to make is that before independence and before Partition, Assam was well integrated into the country's economy and its growth rate was better than the all-India

average. Its economy was well-linked to markets at home and abroad by river and rail through Calcutta and Chittagong. In fact, the region was a land of opportunity. Verghese rightly points out that 'this part of Assam's economic history seems to have been forgotten' *because* the Partition radically altered the situation. The immense transport disadvantage into which Assam and the northeastern region[17] was pushed into by the Partition made it impossible for the region to develop its industrial infrastructure and compete with the rest of the nation. Referring to the change that was triggered by the Partition, Verghese observes:

> ... the physical and psychological severity of the blow was not fully appreciated elsewhere in the country and the disruption in communications and markets was not repaired soon enough nor infrastructure developed to match the new needs. Isolated and *traumatized, the north-east (Assam) turned inward* [author's emphasis]. A succession of insurgencies and movements to seek separation or autonomy, assert identity or exclude foreigners and outsiders aggravated the hiatus, with the rest of the country coming to think of the region with disinterest as a far away place, perpetually disturbed.[18]

Therefore, in order to understand why this change occurred, why one of the most multiethnic, multilingual societies of the country is today gripped by violence of all denominations ranging from anti-state to interethnic and intra-ethnic, why a region which offered plenty of opportunities and welcomed people from different climes and regions is today being torn apart by violence which is sometimes so difficult to comprehend, one must go back to the those tumultuous days of the 1940s. This was the period when the region was struggling on the one hand to keep itself as a part of India and was faced with the actual possibility of becoming a part of a theocratic state about to be born out of Partition of the country, while on the other it was faced with the imminent possibility of geographical isolation from the rest of the country—a fact which would cause grave damage to its economy and the entire development process. Therefore, one could begin by discussing what may be termed as the pre-independence or pre-Partition blues.

The period immediately preceding the Partition and the coming of independence was marked by intense debate in the public sphere over several major issues. Immigration from East Bengal, land, questions of

identity, and the fear of eventually being turned into a Muslim-majority province and being included in Pakistan dominated the public space. Interestingly, more than six decades after independence and Partition, exactly these issues have come to dominate the sociopolitical scenario of Assam today. It is as if Assam has been caught in a time warp. For instance, a look into the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA) in the years immediately preceding independence shows that the major part of the discussions was taken up by these same issues, with the house being diametrically divided between the Congress and the Muslim League. While Congress members accused the League of trying to turn the region into a Muslim majority one by encouraging influx of land-hungry Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal, the League accused the Congress of following a pro-Hindu line by calling for the eviction of people who were genuine citizens of the country and who had a right to settle wherever they pleased. I would like to refer to some of the speeches made by Congress and League members of the ALA during the March 1946 Budget Session. This is what the Finance Minister Bishnuram Medhi had to say in his budget speech about the occupation of grazing reserves by the immigrants:

> Since after the Muslim League put the claim to include Assam in Pakistan Zone, a large number of immigrants practically began to *invade* Assam as if under a plan although there was no sufficient arable land even to provide the landless indigenous Hindus, Muslims, tribals and others who had no economic holdings. From figures available so far it can be safely said that the availability of arable waste land in Assam is not sufficient for the landless indigenous people and those who have no economic holding. I appeal to the Bengal Government and the leaders of public opinion to dissuade the people from coming to Assam in the hope of getting land here ... This sudden influx of immigrants (specially during the war) imported by the Dewanias in various places, failing to get Waste Land began to encroach on the village grazing reserves and professional grazing reserves in direct violation of the law leading to serious clashes. These lands have been reserved of definite purpose and settlement is forbidden to all persons—immigrants and non-immigrants.[19]

Medhi stressed on the maintenance of these reserves, cattle and buffaloes being an integral part of the village economy. He went on to say:

> Due to the short-sighted policy pursued by some of the Ministers of the last government (Muslim League) these reserves which play such a vital part in the economic life of the rural people, were opened under the guise of the Grow-More-Food Campaign[20] and about 1,60,000 bighas of reserve land were settled with immigrants to the exclusion of the just claims of the landless indigenous people including Hindus, Muslims, tribals and Scheduled. The entire people of the Assam valley were startled by such de-reservation and settlement of land to immigrants to the exclusion of the indigenous people. Sir Mohammad Saadulla[21] fully realized the injustice done to the people of the soil and convened a conference of all parties which came to an agreement with the Honourable Gopi Nath Bardoloi and Srijut Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri. In pursuance of that agreement, it was decided by the last Government that that *recent* encroachers should be forthwith evicted from *all* professional grazing reserves and a resolution dated 13 July, 1945 to that effect was published in the gazette. Unfortunately on some plea or other during the last election campaign, the resolution was not given effect to till the care-taker Ministry resigned.

Medhi was supported actively by the Congress member, Beli Ram Das, who spoke exclusively on the 'immigration problem' and land settlement. He said that, 'Jinnah's demand for the inclusion of Assam in the Eastern Zone of his proposed Pakistan has been to a great extent responsible for the complication of the land problem in Assam, even though the problem is purely an *economic one*'. Declaring that the 'existence of the Assamese people was at stake' Das said that what the great Mughals could not achieve, was being achieved by the Muslim League. According to Das, immigration was primarily a political design; he referred to the speech of Maulana Rauf at a League meeting at Barpeta on 7–8 March 1944, where Rauf stated:

> The same blood which runs through their veins even today took the rudder … for a new conquest of Assam … The souls of martyrs and devotees of past, are witnessing this new expedition of the Bengalee Muslims … with increased vitality in the life of the community and with the help of numerous new reinforcements, the figure in the subdivision of Barpeta alone could be raised to 65,000.[22]

The argument which held that further pressure on land would pose a threat to the identity of the indigenous population was refuted by Muslim League members who demanded that the Inner Line regula-

tions be done away with and the province be opened up totally to the immigrants. They also accused the local Assamese of being indolent and incapable of tilling their lands. For instance, Maulana Abdul Rauf said that if the Assamese did not have enough land, it was because they did not need it. Mayeen Uddin Chaudhury of the Muslim League spelt out this argument quite effectively in the following lines during the Legislative Assembly (LA) debate of March 1946:

> Sir, it is said that the Assamese as a race will be extinct if the cordon (Line System) is not placed. However attractive a remedy it may look, its efficacy is doubtful to save a nation. Not to speak of such artificial barriers like the Line System, if a Chinese wall is erected around them, they are bound to be extinct if they are not made strong and industrious.

From this argument it follows that the Assamese are both weak and lazy and no amount of government protection would be able to save them from extinction![23]

The major fallacy of this argument lies not in the movement of people from one region to another because of economic compulsions but in the attempt to justify the occupation of land by blaming the locals for their incapacity to grow more and better crops. The 'superior' resilience and perseverance of a certain community cannot be made the *raison d'être* for the occupation of government lands and reserves kept aside for the tribal population. The 'indolence' of the local population was often cited as a common reason for the abolition of all restrictive measures on land. It needs to be remembered that land was central to the identity and culture of the indigenes whose approach to the idea of ownership and tenancy was very different. The debate clearly revealed that the Muslim League tried to justify its stand on immigration by a variety of reasons such as the 'easy availability of land' in Assam, the easygoing nature of the local people who left vast stretches uncultivated, the natural tendency of people moving from overpopulated areas to less populated ones, that it was within their rights to move from one region of the country to another, and so on. What is often overlooked is that the land ownership pattern in the Brahmaputra Valley was very different from regions like Bengal which had the Permanent Settlement. A vast majority of tribal peasants did not have any land papers and moved from one plot to another every few years. The point is whether such an argument would be applicable to the different tribal areas of the country where

there are regulations that prohibit the transfer of land from indigenous hands. For instance, Himachal Pradesh has been having such a land regulation for a very long time and no one says that the Himachalis should forfeit their right over their land because they are not as industrious (or wouldn't even like to be) as their plain-dwelling brothers from the nearby states of Punjab and Haryana. Similarly, nearer home, the land of the Nagas, Mizos, Arunachalis, and Khasis have been protected through government legislation enacted before and after independence. What is involved here is something that stretches far beyond the question of land ownership.

However, one important point that arises out of this discussion is: When does a citizen moving from one area of the country to another become an unwelcome migrant and his presence is resisted by the indigenes? This must be seen against the background of the rising pressure on cultivable land, the nature of land relations prevailing in the region and the rise and consolidation of Assamese linguistic nationalism from the 1920s onwards. As pressure on land mounted, Assamese middle-class organizations started raising the issue of immigration and the threat it posed to the identity and culture of the Assamese people. This argument got a boost when the Muslim League made its intentions clear about including Assam in Pakistan. In this connection, the role played by the colonial state in Assam also needs to be emphasized. Initial waves of immigration into Assam were encouraged by the colonial state which went about classifying the land into different segments—waste lands, reserves, and tribal belts and blocks. The very nature of the colonial economy made it imperative for immigration to occur and this explains the encouragement to immigrants on the part of large landowners of Goalpara district which was covered by Permanent Settlement rules so that they could meet the revenue demands of the colonial state. Moreover, the demands of the growing jute industry in Bengal encouraged immigration into Assam which had a conducive climate for the cash crops. Therefore, Muslim League politics in Assam cannot be discussed minus the role of the colonial state. Actually, the Muslim League's position on immigration into Assam was similar to that of the colonial state's—till the late 1940s when the pressure on cultivable land took on new proportions and the issue of immigration got politicized. By the time Mullan finalized his census report for 1931, the first wave of immigration into Assam's Goalpara district was almost

over and the second wave into the lower and middle Assam districts had begun. This is reflected in the LA debates of the late 1930s and early 1940s which are dominated by the issue of immigration and occupation of reserves and tribal belts and blocks in districts like Nowgong.[24]

Therefore, all this needs to be viewed against the wider historical context of immigration into Assam. Historically, Assam has never been new to immigration. Its very culture is born out of different streams of immigration over the centuries. When the tea industry began in the early part of the 19th century, thousands upon thousands of indentured workers were brought from different regions of India to man the tea estates. The important point to note about the tea garden tribes or adivasis is that they did not compete with the local population for the occupation of cultivable land. Rather, they were confined within the tea estates. This section of people has largely integrated itself into the broader Assamese society while at the same time maintaining some of their original attributes. Though occasionally, certain sections within this community have been asserting their roots and demanding reservations as scheduled tribes, yet these movements have not really taken off, with the vast majority of the population having opted to tie up their destiny with that of the Assamese people. Apart from these people, peasants from neighbouring East Bengal have long been coming into the Brahmaputra Valley and they were welcomed by Assamese landowners who found in them an easy and cheap source of labour. The number of these peasants suddenly started increasing from the 1930s onwards and large tracts of land came to be occupied. But this flow of people and their settlement in the waste lands and riverine areas remained primarily a socioeconomic problem, although occasionally the emerging Assamese middle-class leadership raised their voices of apprehension at the demographic change that was taking place. But, with Partition politics gaining ground, the issue of immigration from East Bengal became swiftly politicized.[25] It no longer remained just an issue which involved land rights of the indigenous peoples in the face of increasing movement of people from one region of the country to another. Once the Lahore Resolution of the All-India Muslim League called for a separate homeland for the country's Muslim population, things changed rather dramatically. The issue of immigration immediately got linked with the League's attempts to turn Assam into a Muslim majority province so that it may be included in the Muslim homeland.

The Muslim League Ministry in Assam headed by Mohammad Saadulla openly espoused the cause of immigration from East Bengal by enacting the Land Settlement Act[26] which gave a great deal of leverage to the immigrant peasants. Despite stiff opposition from the Assam Congress which wanted strict implementation of the Line System since the late 1930s, the Saadulla ministry introduced the Land Development Scheme in January 1938 to be followed by the Act. The scheme was kept in abeyance whenever the new government headed by Bardoloi came into power. Finally, it was in 1943 that the Saadulla government revived its controversial land settlement and immigration policy. Discussing this, Amalendu Guha writes:

> The Bengal Legislative Council carried a motion on 16 July 1943 calling upon the Government of India to take immediate steps to remove existing restrictions imposed by the Assam Government on the land-hungry, immigrant cultivators from Bengal. Exactly a year after its formation, the fourth Saadulla Ministry, therefore, adopted a new resolution on land settlement under the slogan, "Grow more Food". What it really meant, according to the Viceroy, was "grow more Moslems".

The salient features of this resolution of 24 August 1943, dealt with the de-reservation of professional grazing reserves and the distribution of wastelands among the immigrants.[27]

Thus, the issue of land[28] suddenly acquired new dimensions because land was central to the identity and life-pattern of most of the indigenous communities despite the fact that for many communities of the region ownership patterns of land were not clearly worked out. The question of land and the rights of the indigenous peoples figured prominently in the Legislative Assembly debates. For instance, the League consistently demanded that the Line System be abolished and the reserves opened up for occupation by the immigrants. The issue of occupation of the grazing reserves, and forest land as well as tribal belts and blocks came up for heated discussion in the ALA in March 1945 (when Saadulla ministry was in power) and the following year (when the Bardoloi ministry had taken charge). Even Mohammad Saadulla agreed that too much pressure on the local people by the 'encroachers' could set the former against them. The issue of tribal land was also hotly debated, with the few tribal members accusing the Saadulla government of doing away with the tribal belts and blocks. Cautioning the immigrant lobby led by the Muslim League, Mohammad Saadulla stated at an immigrant

peasant rally in April 1944 that the greed of the headmen of immigrant villages was the root of the problem and he drew a parallel with unrestricted Jewish migration to the Arab homeland. He pleaded for the protection of Assam's plain-dwelling tribals from the onslaught of the immigrants and said that even Assamese Muslims were being driven out of their lands by new immigrants from east Bengal.[29] The indigenous-immigrant divide which is a central marker in the politics of Assam today may be said to have taken shape in those pre-Partition days of the 1930s and 1940s when the immigrants' fight for the reserves and wastelands took on a new and threatening edge under the leadership of the Muslim League and men like Maulana Bhasani and Abdul Rouf.

Once the League made its intentions clear, the panic button was struck and several indigenous communities/nationalities demanded that their autonomous/independent existence be ensured in the event of the country being divided into two nations on the basis of religion. In this connection, one may refer to the position adopted by organizations like the Ahom Association, the Khasi–Jaintia Political Association, the All Assam Plains Tribal League (AAPTL), the United Mizo Freedom Party, and so on. While the Ahom Association demanded that the independent status of the Ahoms be ensured in case the country were to be divided into India and Pakistan, the AAPTL, a conglomerate of several plains tribal organizations of Assam, demanded that 'Assam proper and its hills should be constituted into a sovereign state. Assam and its hills should not be made part or province of any federation—Hindustan or Pakistan—without the consent of its people'.[30] The Kachari Sanmelan also expressed similar views. In a meeting held in September 1944, the All Assam Ahom Association declared: 'In view of the peculiar position of Assam, both geographically and otherwise, and the great preponderance of the Mongolian races with their distinctive languages, cultures and religions in the population of the province, Assam without Sylhet has a legitimate claim for free and independent existence in the event of India being divided territorially into Pakistan and Hindustan zones'.[31] Not only the different ethnic organizations, but also political parties like the CPI endorsed the idea of an independent Assam. For instance, Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya, the CPI leader from Assam, clearly spelt out the possibility of an independent Assam in an article entitled 'Pakistan and Assam' published in the *Assam Tribune* on 10 November 1944.[32] Writers like Jnananath Bora[33] had already tried to build up their

thesis for an independent Assam in the late 1930s and the fear of the Assamese of being included in Pakistan further spurred such concepts. It is interesting to note that even within Congressmen in Assam, the fear of Pakistan brought out autonomist and separatist demands and this can be seen in the writings of Assamese intellectuals like Ambikagiri Roychoudhury. An ardent Congressman who nourished the idea of an autonomous Assam within the greater *mahajati* of India, Ambikagiri, in his article 'The Case of the Great Assamese People and their Homeland: Assam' spawned autonomist ideas which were taken up later on in the post-independence period by organizations like the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Parishad.[34]

Thus, identity fears of the indigenous people which were spawned by large-scale influx and occupation of land in the in the 1930s and 1940s took on a highly political turn when the Pakistan angle was added to it. The apprehension that the region could become a part of a Muslim-majority Pakistan led several ethnic organizations of undivided Assam to demand autonomous states of their own, sometimes even outside the Indian Union. Different political groups and organizations started advancing their own agendas of autonomy or independence and the feeling seemed to be quite strong, even among certain sections of the Assam Congress, that, if necessary, Assam would have to stay out of the entire process of independence and maybe also out of the Indian Union.[35] Discussing this, Amalendu Guha writes: 'The immigrant question quickly matured into a political crisis, in the last pre-independence decade. During the controversy over "grouping" under the Cabinet Mission Plan, a demand for the self-determination of Assam was brought into the limelight to forestall its threatened inclusion in East Pakistan'.[36] Therefore, in order to understand the beginnings of militant Assamese nationalism in the late 1960s when the Lachit Sena[37] made its rather brief but significant presence felt, one needs to take into account the identity fears that were spawned in the years preceding Partition and the moribund state into which the economy was pushed in the post-independence period.

The point that needs to be reiterated is that the seeds of distrust and apprehension regarding the central Congress leadership sown by the latter's ambivalent approach to Assam's future ultimately sprouted into varying forms of discontent with the politics of the Indian mainland. Although the success of the Assam Congress in scuttling the Grouping

proposals strengthened the Congress's position in the state and kept at bay the separatist forces, yet the bitterness which was generated over the role of the central Congress leadership, would continue to colour Assam's relations with the Centre for years to come. The general impression in the public mind seemed to be strengthened by the feeling that those in power at the Centre wouldn't hesitate to barter away Assam for what they considered the 'good' of the country. This feeling of being 'betrayed' would play a major role in shaping the Assamese mindset of the 1960s[38] and 1970s when several factors combined to strengthen this impression and give a fillip to separatist or autonomist tendencies that took real shape during the 1990s when organizations like the ULFA started taking the centre stage in the state's politics.

Another major fallout of Partition politics was the rather sharp polarization along the linguistic lines that took place. Although the Sylhet Referendum and Partition put an end to Assamese fears of being subsumed in a Muslim-majority Bengali-speaking Pakistan, yet certain developments in the years immediately following independence added to Assamese apprehensions about their future identity and composition of their state. One such development was the inflow of Bengali-Hindu refugees from the newly-created East Pakistan. A major rift developed between the Assam government and New Delhi over the settlement of refugees in the state. The Assamese middle class of which the Assam Congress was the main platform, expressed apprehensions about the fallout of such refugee settlements in the province. The long history of Assamese–Bengali rivalry once again surfaced and the Bengali-Hindu became the target of wrath in the post-independence years. Certain related developments added to this rivalry and bitterness between the two communities. In the months just before independence when the overall political atmosphere was already surcharged by the Muslim League's attempts to launch a civil disobedience movement to further its demand for the total opening up of the wastelands and reserves to immigrant settlers, the sudden inflow of Bengali-Hindu refugees added to the identity fears of the Assamese people. Assamese-Bengali rivalry took a turn for the worse when the idea of a separate Purbachal was mooted by a section of the Bengali-Hindu leadership. As it was, the two communities had never been on the best of terms, with the Assamese middle class viewing the Bengali-Hindu as a threat to its language and culture. It may be recalled at this point that unlike the Bengali-Muslim

who was prepared to don the Assamese mantle in his bid to survive in hostile conditions, the Bengali-Hindu not only stuck to his language and culture but often made it a point to stress its superiority over other tongues. Now, with the idea of Purbachal being floated, Assamese-Bengali relations reached a new low. Such moves were seen as a direct challenge to the Assamese middle class' dream of securing for themselves a homogeneous Assamese homeland.

Assamese intransigence against the Bengali-Hindus in the years immediately preceding Partition needs to be viewed against the growing demand sponsored by a section of Bengali politicians and intellectuals based primarily in Kolkata for a separate Purbachala Pradesh to be carved out of the state of Assam and made up of Cachar, the Lushai Hills, the states of Tripura and Manipur, Naga, Khasi, and Garo Hills, and Goalpara. A resolution was prepared to be moved at the Jaipur session of the Indian National Congress (INC) which would have demanded the creation of Purbachal Pradesh so as to check the chauvinism of the Asamiya people. The demand, which was backed up by a well-prepared map of the proposed Purbachal, said that the new province would consist of an area of 43,037 square miles and a population of 38,61,222. But what is most striking in the proposed plan is the latent anti-Assamese feeling that marks the entire document. Not only is the Assamese language dismissed as an inferior dialect of the Bengali, but the Bengalis are referred to as intelligent and hardworking against the indolent and ignorant Assamese. Referring to the Assamese or Asomiya language, the document states:

> The Ashamiya language of the Assamese, is an old form of Bengali. The script of the Ashamiya language is wholesale Bengali. From the time of Sree Chaitanya, the founder of the Gaudiya-Vaishnab School, the Bengali language has made great strides towards progress, while "Ashamiya" has remained practically static. To an impartial observer, "Ashamiya" will appear as one of the several spoken dialects on which chaste Bengali thrives. The Ashamiya dialect is much closer to Bengali than the spoken tongues of Chittagong and Noakhali. But, it is under an inferiority complex that the Assamese of the Assam Valley plains numbering two million (roughly), have clung to a spoken dialect miscalled Ashamiya language. To thrust such an undeveloped and poor dialect of a minority on the people other than Assamese, is an act of high-handedness.[39]

The document further stated that the creation of a Purbachal would finally solve the problem of East Bengal refugees and would 'counteract the Muslim League infiltration which (has) imperiled the existence of Assam as one of the units of the Indian Union'. It accused the Assamese of having 'committed a glaring anti-national disservice to the Indian Union' by neglecting to prevent Muslim infiltration into the region. It further stated that:

> the move for a separate Purbachala Pradesh is not merely on linguistic ground. It is an act of self-preservation. The non-Assamese, who form the majority in Assam, want to have a particular region, where they, being free from dictatorial oppression and economic exploitation by the plain-Assamese group, who now control an run the present government of Assam, may mould their own destiny according to their choice.[40]

This was clearly seen by the Assamese middle class as a concerted move on the part of the Hindu-Bengali intelligentsia to break up Assam by joining hands with the hill tribes.

Demands like the one for Purbachal and the consistent opposition by a section of the Hindu-Bengali middle class to Assamese attempts to have Assamese as the official language of the state further added to the Assamese-Bengali bitterness in the state. The communal situation worsened in the first few years following independence and the Assamese nationalist viewpoint was aired mostly by the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha (AJM) led by Ambikagiri Roychoudhury. Even as the communal situation worsened and there were several instances of attacks on Bengali houses, shops and establishments in lower and central Assam, Bengali residents of several towns petitioned the Bardoloi government for protective measures.[41] The AJM, on its part, maintained that 'the old Bengali settlers are the main elements who have done immense harm to the peaceful existence of Assam and they are the source of all trouble. They have never been loyal to the State of Assam. They are disintegrating and undesirable elements'.[42]

Thus, attempts in the Brahmaputra Valley to exert Assamese hegemony and consolidate the position of the Assamese language in the immediate post-Partition years led to confrontation with the Bengali-Hindus, while the immigrant Muslim population adopted the strategy of siding with the Assamese by espousing the cause of the Assamese language. In the already communally surcharged atmosphere over the

influx of refugees, it did not take long for the Assamese nationalist organizations to mobilize public opinion against the Bengali-Hindus who were painted generally as enemies of the Assamese language and culture. Hence, the years immediately following Partition were marked by a large degree of animosity against the Bengali-Hindus who, unlike their Bengali-Muslim counterparts, were unwilling to give up their linguistic identity and their right to education in their mother tongue. For instance, when the Government of Assam issued a press note on the 28 June 1950[43] declaring Assamese as the medium of instruction in the schools of the Assam Valley districts, there was stiff resistance from a large section of Bengali-Hindu intellectuals of the state. The Assam government press note made it clear that Assamese would be the medium of instruction at the primary and junior basic levels in all the schools of the Assam Valley districts and that in schools where the mother tongue was different, Assamese would have to be taught from Class III and not later than the end of the Junior Basic stage. There was, however, a rider which stated that in schools where there were more than 40 students with a mother tongue other than Assamese, then provision for a separate teacher be made for them and that schools which had already opted for the Assamese medium need not do so. The circular also made it clear that the private institutions would be allowed to continue with the medium of instruction which they had been following. Thus, according to the government circular, Assamese would effectively be the medium of instruction in government, municipal, and local board schools. This met with stiff resistance from a section of the Bengali intelligentsia who saw this as a move aimed at reducing their rights as citizens of the country. It is interesting to note that while the immigrant Muslim population took full advantage of this government move to educate their children in the Assamese medium,[44] the Bengali-Hindus continued with their resistance to any attempts at what they believed to be the imposition of one particular language in a multilingual state. This position of a section of the Bengali-Hindu intelligentsia[45] would lead to a long-drawn bitterness between these two communities finally leading to the language riots of the 1960s.[46]

In the context of Bengali-Hindu resistance to any sort of official status to the Assamese language, the post-Partition years were marked by a strong animosity between the two communities. This was evident in the growing mobilization of Assamese public opinion in favour of the

increasing public use of the Assamese language, an act which was seen to be synonymous with the consolidation of the Assamese national consciousness. Hence, this period was marked by public utterances by many a Assamese political leader and intellectual about the dangers posed to the Assamese identity by Bengali cultural hegemony. What is interesting is that the Bengali 'cultural expansionism' was equated with the activities of the Communist Party in Assam and both were viewed as part of the conspiracy to create a greater Bengal. This viewpoint was, however, not confined to any particular section of the Assamese intelligentsia but was also shared by people in the highest echelons of power. During the stand-off between the Centre and the Assam government over the refugee issue, the former proposed that refugees be settled on railway land which belonged to the central government. When the Assam government objected to this on the rather facile plea that the railway employees were by and large communist sympathizers and if the refugees were settled on railway land, they too would come under communist influence, Nehru wrote back to Bardoloi:

> It means that we should not employ Bengalis anywhere in India, as communism might spread because Bengalis might be presumed to be communists…If Assam wants to follow a narrow provincial policy excluding others, there are bound to be reactions against Assam in other parts of India. It will be difficult for the Central government to have any major scheme in Assam. (Barooah, 1990, 33)

Post-Partition Assam saw a distinct rise in anti-Bengali feelings in the Brahmaputra valley districts and demands were made in certain areas for the removal of Bengali signboards from shops and establishments and for the assimilation of the Bengalis into the Assamese fold. Meetings were held at several places where virulent attacks were mounted on the Bengali-Hindus who were referred to as collaborators with the communists who were not only trying to subvert the newly independent nation-state but harboured intentions of creating a greater Bengal. The regional press (both Assamese and English) contributed its share in building up the perception in the public mind that Bengali-Hindu refugees were moved by communal considerations and that they were agents of the communists. For instance, The *Assam Tribune* of 2 August 1949 in a news published under the header 'Tense Situation in Hojai: Communists and Bastuharas Combined against Assam', referred

to the tense situation in Hojai and wrote that the town had become a 'rendezvous of the Communists and the dreams (sic!) of a greater Bengal'. It went on to conclude thus: 'From the circumstances that have been observed at Hojai, Lanka, and Lumding during the days of the enumeration of refugees, it is clear beyond doubt that the communists, Citizens' Association and railway employees have all acted jointly to establish greater Bengal and a sense of tense insecurity prevails there'.[47]

Further, local Assamese journals also whipped up feelings against the Bengali refugees and painted them as communist agents. For instance, the *Bihlongani*,[48] a journal published from Nowgong, clearly linked the settlement of Bengali refugees in Assam with the conspiracy to make it a part of greater Bengal and,[49] while referring to the 'communal politics' of Bengal, said that attempts were being made to make the Nehru–Liaquat Pact infructuous. While linking the Bengali refugees with the communists, the journal posed the question: 'How many among the trouble-creating Communists in Assam are really Assamese? Most of them are Bengalees. Who are those who are trying to use terrorism as a tool to bring the simple Assamese folk under the banner of Bengali leadership?'[50] Referring to Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee's visit to Assam in the first part of June 1950,[51] when he pleaded for better understanding between the Bengalis and the Assamese and asked the former to associate themselves more actively with the interests of the state, the journal pointed out that whereas the immigrant Muslims had accepted the Assamese language and were in harmonious relationship with the Assamese, the Bengali refugees were toeing a communal line. It said that if Dr Mookerjee was really interested in Bengali–Assamese amity, then he should help in putting a final end to the Bengali educational and religious institutions, and Bengali associations and merge these with the Assamese.[52] Leaving aside such extremist posturings, it may be said that the position adopted by the journal in relation to the Bengali-Muslims as against the Bengali-Hindu was shared by a section of the Assamese middle class which clearly favoured the Bengali Muslim to the Bengali Hindu refugee. Nehru, while referring to this, wrote thus in a letter to Bardoloi:

> About the influx of Hindus from East Bengal … I am told that your government or some of your ministers have openly stated that they prefer Muslims of East Bengal to Hindus from East Bengal. While I,

> for one, always like any indication of a lack of communal feeling in dealing with public matters, I must confess that this strong objection to Hindu refugees coming from East Bengal is a little difficult for me to understand. I am afraid Assam is getting a bad name for its narrow-minded policy.[53]

While holding no brief whatsoever for such chauvinist outpourings on the part of a section of the Assamese middle class, yet such extreme reactions must be seen against the background of persistent assertions made by Bengali-Hindu organizations about the minority status of the Assamese language. Repeated attempts to prove the minority status of the Assamese language compounded with allegations of racism and parochialism against the Assam government headed by Gopinath Bardoloi added substantially to the growing schism between the Assamese and the Bengali-speaking Hindu population of the state. The different Bengali refugee organizations submitted memoranda to the Centre accusing the Assam government of parochialism and 'separatism' and trying to impose the Assamese language on the entire population of the state. For instance, the Central Refugee Board, Cachar, in its memorandum submitted to Shyama Prasad Mookerjee on 23 June 1950, stated that:

> the policy of the Government of Assam with regard to the refugees is influenced to a great extent by a section of the Assamese people whose attitude is one of opposition to rehabilitation of refugees on the score of their being Bengalis by race. There is a reluctance on the part of the government of Assam to provide lands for the accommodation of the refugees. Until very recently the policy of the Government was to treat the measure as mere temporary as they expected the Nehru-Liaquat Pact would effect a repatriation of the refugees before 31 December, 1950. With this attitude prevailing in the Government of Assam it is difficult to expect a smooth and speedy rehabilitation unless the Central Government *dictate* a sound policy regarding land and enforce it in an expedient method. The refugee problem is an all-India problem and it is surely a matter of great regret that a Provincial and a Separatist outlook should offer stifling resistance to a solution of the problem and hamper the growth and cohesion of National Unity. This internecine struggle on parochial or rather racial grounds such as, Assam for the Assamese, Bihar for the Beharis and the like must be stamped out ....

The memorandum further refers to the language policy of the Assam government and states:

> The disruptive policy springing out of Provincial considerations derives its main strength from the distinctiveness of the various languages spoken in different parts of the country and this element is most potent in Assam—amongst a section of the Assamese speaking people whose ambition aims at propagating their language all over the Province. This is directly in contravention of the special directives so judiciously enunciated in the Constitution of India. In Assam about 22% of the people speak Assamese and the percentage of the Bengali-speaking people including the refugees who have come over to stay will be about 50% and the remaining 28% speak Hindi and Tribal languages ... This language question must be pushed below the surface and must not be allowed to flutter [*sic*] disturbance in the formation of National Unity on a cultural basis.[54]

Such positionings helped communalize the entire issue of refugee settlement in Assam, despite the fact that the state had taken in more than three lakhs of Bengali-Hindu refugees. Added to the growing animosity between the two communities was the feeling that the Assamese middle class leadership had helped the separation of Sylhet from Assam. While it is a fact that an influential section of the Assamese middle class led by the Assam Congress was in favour of Sylhet's separation, yet it would be wrong to suggest that this section had played a role in manipulating the transfer which occurred through a referendum which was part of the process of transfer of power. The Sylhet issue would continue to be a major sore point in Assamese-Bengali relations for decades to follow.

Given the long history of resistance to the Assamese language from a section of the Bengali middle class, the aggressiveness of its Assamese counterpart was, in many senses, helped by the news reports of the Calcutta press as also by concerted opposition put up by a section of Bengali intellectuals of the Brahmaputra Valley.[55] Quoting from the 1931 Census figures, the memorandum pointed out that the Assamese did not constitute a majority in post-independence Assam and that there was no justification in having Assamese as the official language even in the Brahmaputra Valley districts. Such positionings naturally added to the communal divide between the two communities and the stage was set for further confrontation. But, there was also a section of the Bengali middle class which blamed the 'exclusiveness, domineer-

ing attitude, extra-provincial patriotism' of the early Bengali settlers of Assam as one of the major causes leading to the rift between the Bengali-Hindu and the Assamese. This section also called upon the Bengalis not to form 'any political party on racial basis' and to 'merge in the Congress, Hindu Mahasabha or Socialist parties formed on a provincial basis'.[56] Language and identity fears associated with it still continue to be a major issue of contention in Assam. For instance, during each Census, appeals are made by Assamese civil society leaders and intellectuals to the immigrant Bengali-turned-Assamese (*na-Asamiyas*) to return Assamese as their mother tongue, lest the majority status of the Assamese language is lost in the state. For once this happens the very identity of the Assamese which is rooted in linguistic nationalism could come under threat. Recent deliberations as to who is really an Assamese point in this direction.

Thus, the politics that was to shape the destiny of the province in the years to follow was greatly determined by the Partition whose ever-lengthening shadow may be seen in contemporary debates on land, immigration, identity, cut-off years for foreign infiltrates, citizenship rights for minorities—the list simply goes on. Assamese hopes of a homogeneous homeland built on the plank of linguistic nationalism were soon to meet with several roadblocks in the form of autonomy demands from several of the small nationalities that were a part of greater or united Assam. Little did the Assamese leadership made up of primarily a weak middle class with little or no hold over the market, visualize that the economic crisis ushered in by the Partition would soon lead to a growing sense of dissatisfaction among the smaller nationalities that would start demanding their share of political power. The autonomy and ethnic nationalist concerns which were generated by the politics of Partition in the 1940s would eventually take concrete shape from the late 1960s onwards and eventually lead to the break-up of undivided Assam, beginning with the formation of the state of Nagaland in 1963. Even within the Assam of the 1970s and 1980s which was now made up of primarily the Brahmaputra/Barak Valleys and the hill districts of North Cachar and Karbi Anglong, the movements for separation and autonomy led by the Bodos, Karbis, and the other plains tribal communities would take on a sharper edge.

Finally, in conclusion it may be said that the aftereffects of the Partition have been really long-ranging in the case of Assam and the

Northeast. On the political front, one witnessed the polarization along communal lines that gave a totally new dimension to the issue of influx from then East Bengal/East Pakistan; it also helped the growth of autonomy concerns among the small nationalities of the region because of the fear of the region going to Pakistan. On the economic front, trade and commerce stood disrupted and infrastructure and development suffered a major setback and triggered waves of dissension among the less developed communities/nationalities, thereby laying the seeds of future militant movements. On the governance angle, security concerns dominated all other aspects and the rule of law and distributive justice were marginalized. Added to all this was the growth of an isolationist mindset which consciously started to move away from the Indian mainland and the civilizational concerns it represented.

Any attempt, therefore, to understand the rise of secessionist militancy in provinces like Assam which have had centuries of socio-historical and cultural relationship with the Indian mainland and its civilizational ethos, must look back into those pre- and post-Partition days when the entire northeastern region was pushed into a position of flux and uncertainty and of how after the Partition both geography and politics underwent a radical change. Thus, among many other things, one of the long-ranging effects of the Partition may be seen in the growth of not only a separatist mindset among the younger generation but, more important, an isolationist attitude. While some work has been done on the psychological impact of the Partition in western India, we do not see any serious study relating to the northeastern region. Once cut off from the Indian mainland and surrounded by regions not easily accessible, a new psychology of both kinds of isolationism developed. This was certainly not so in the pre-Partition days when the movement of people across the plains of the Indian subcontinent into the Assam plains and further was quite common. Partition seriously disrupted, if not finally put an end to, such interaction. Those who were angry with the Indian leadership's insensitivity towards this region started looking eastward and, in doing so, tried to disown the cultural and political links with the rest of the subcontinent. The process of rewriting and reinterpreting the history of the region began and the 'Indian' link was sought to be assiduously discounted. This tendency was to be seen in the agenda of the militant outfits who swore by their East Asian neighbours whose culture and civilization they tried to emulate. The security concerns of

the Indian mainland, the failure to empathize with the people of the region, the reluctance to invest capital and develop the much-needed infrastructure of the northeast, the attempts to rule the region with draconian laws and, most important, the continued tendency to view the region and its people as the 'other'—all have contributed towards alienating the northeastern region from the mainland.

Fortunately, perspectives have begun to change and the great resilience and power of accommodation of the Indian Constitution have gone a long way in neutralizing the separatist tendencies and their theses of civilizational difference. The carving out of new political and cultural spaces for the small nationalities of the region have resulted in its own set of problems. But such measures have also shown the willingness of the Indian nation-state to accommodate the aspirations of the small nationalities within the expanding parameters of the nation-state. But, even as peace negotiations are on with the different militant organizations, many of the issues thrown up in the pre- and post-Partition days are yet to be resolved. Primary among these is the question of ensuring the identity of the small nationalities, the problem of illegal infiltration from East Pakistan and Bangladesh and demographic change, the alienation from land of the ethnic population, the rights of the states over their natural resources and, to put it in broad terms, the restructuring of the quasi-federal relationship between the Union and the states into a truly federal one. Till these are even partially resolved, Assam would continue to be in the time warp.

Notes

1. Assam refers to the undivided state of Assam prior to independence and up to the 1960s when the first state to be carved out of Assam was Nagaland (1963). This was followed by the State's Reorganization Act of 1971 which created the states of Meghalaya and Mizoram. Today Assam constitutes mainly the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar. The umbrella connotation 'Northeast' came to be used to refer to the seven states of the region, most of them having once been a part of undivided Assam. The term Northeast is basically an 'illusive construct' and does not do justice to the diversity of histories and cultures of the people of the region, and creates hurdles in one's attempts to understand the region. Udayon Misra, *The Periphery*

Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS), 2000).

2. The results of the Referendum in Sylhet have not been accepted as a democratic verdict by many scholars. Even leaders like Nehru and Patel expressed their grave reservations about the justness of the Referendum. It was alleged that a large segment of the Hindu population were not allowed to cast their votes by Muslim League activists (Telegram to Acharya Kripalani from Secretary Referendum Committee, Habiganj 7 July 1947, Nehru Memorial Muslim and Library (NMML) Collection). Sylhet went to Pakistan by a majority of just 55,578 votes. Even in the case of certain Hindu-majority areas which had voted for India, infrastructural reasons were cited to prevent their inclusion in India. For instance the British administration did not take into consideration the wishes of certain Hindu-majority areas of Sylhet, citing severance of communication lines as a reason. The South Sylhet subdivision had voted by a majority of 40,000 votes to stay with India and was contiguous to the *thanas* of Pathakandi and Ratabari of Karimganj district which formed part of the Indian union. But Cyril Radcliffe put this region along with the non-Muslim majority *thana* of Barlekha in Pakistan on the contention that despite being a Hindu-majority area, its inclusion in India would lead to 'the awkward severance of the railway line through Sylhet so that for instance, the junction (Kulaura) for the town of Sylhet ... would lie in India' (Refer proceedings of meeting of non-Muslim residents of South Sylhet held on 28 August 1947, NMML collection). A similar argument was put forward by Radcliffe to include the vastly Buddhist-majority Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Pakistan. It was argued that if the CHT went to India, the Chittagong port would be deprived of its hinterland (refer *Transfer of Power* Vol XII).

3. One of the 'gains' of independence for the Assamese middle-class leadership was the creation of what they believed to be a homogeneous state of Assam following the separation of the Bengali-speaking populous district of Sylhet. Refer Assam Congress election appeal of 1945.

4. Assam's borders suddenly changed and after Partition, 95 per cent of the borders were now with foreign countries and only 5 per cent remain with India. Willem van Schendel in his work *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia,* says that most partition histories deal with Bengal, Punjab, and Kashmir in relation to the Partition but few refer to the impact of Partition in regions like Assam. He points out that what is quite often overlooked is that along with the partition of Bengal, there was 'a simultaneous surgery creating a novel and isolated Northeast India' Discussing the impact of Partition on Assam and the entire northeastern region, B.G. Verghese says: 'Partition was traumatic. It converted the

Northeast, hitherto no more than a vague geographical expression, into a distinct geo-political region, virtually landlocked though tenuously joined to the mainland. This political predicament was compounded by consequent economic disruption', B.G. Verghese 1996, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governnence, Development* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1996), pp. 336–7.

5. Wilhelm Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), p. 28.

6. Report of the High Level Commission to the Prime Minister. 'Transforming the North–East: Tackling Backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Needs', Planning Commission, Government of India, 1997. The Commission was chaired by S.P. Shkula.

7. The Assam Bengal Railway was extended from Dibrugarh to Chittagong in 1904. On 16 February1904, Lord Curzon while inaugurating the completion of the Dibrugarh–Chittagong line, referred to it as 'one of the costliest and most difficult railway enterprises' of the British Raj. The main exports through the Chittagong port, tea and jute, shot up since 1904–05.

8. Rail connection between Assam and India lay disrupted after the metre-gauge line between Gitaldah and Parbatipur went to Pakistan. The construction of the Assam Rail Link began in 1948 and was completed on 9 December 1949 when the line was opened to goods traffic. Passenger traffic began on the new rail link from 26 January 1950. For details, see *Transport System and Economic Development of Assam* by S.B. Medhi (Guwahati: Publication Board, 1978), pp. 87–9.

9. Undivided Assam representing the greater part of today's Northeast.

10. For instance, the growth performance of agriculture, which is the mainstay of the state's economy, has been continuously going down since the 1970s and today hovers around a mere 1 per cent.

11. The growth rate in electricity, gas, and water supply has been falling continuously, and from 9.4 per cent per year in the 1980s it fell to a mere 0.9 per cent in the 1990s. Similarly, capital expenditure for development fell from 3 per cent of NSDP in 1980–1 to 1.5 per cent in 1997–98. Refer Assam Development Report, Planning Commission, GOI.

12. 'NEC: A Saga of Vision, Commitment and Achievement: Glorious 35 Years of Existence' (Shillong: 2007), p. 3.

13. The largest of such upsurges against the issue of foreign nationals was the Assam Movement (1979–85). Though the movement against foreign nationals was confined to the Brahmaputra Valley, its main concern about the challenge posed to the identity of the indigenes by continued influx from East Pakistan/Bangladesh was shared by almost all the other

states of the northeastern region. Rising unemployment throughout the northeastern region, the lack of infrastructural facilities and growing pressure on land gave the movement an added thrust.

14. Quite often Assam heads the charts in interethnic, state and militant killings.

15. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent* (Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1996), pp. 336–7.

16. Experts have maintained that the lack of adequate infrastructure cannot be made up by initiatives like the Look East Policy. Unless the different states of the northeastern region are adequately connected by a proper road and rail network, and power and communications given a priority so that industrial development is put on track, mere opening up through the Look East Policy would make the northeastern region just a transit point for Indian manufactures and goods.

17. Verghese states: 'The main artery of communication, inland water transport, was severed with Partition and continued fitfully until altogether suspended after the 1985 hostilities with Pakistan'. Of late, voices have been raised in diplomatic and civil society quarters about the need to fully revive this river route. Under the Sheikh Hasina leadership, Bangladesh is also trying to reach out to India and several confidence building measures have been initiated. However, the issue of transit rights through Bangladesh remains a contentious matter.

18. Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA) proceedings, March 1946, Shillong, 23–4.

19. Under this campaign which was initiated through a 1941 Land Settlement Act, which in itself was highly controversial, the Muslim League Ministry headed by Syed Saadulla actively encouraged the inflow of immigrants from Bengal on the plea that this was needed to boost up food production during the war years. The Congress strongly opposed the move and Lord Wavell described the Grow More Food Campaign as a Grow More Muslims one. Saadulla boasted in a letter to Liaquat Ali Khan, the right hand man of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, that because of the Land Settlement Policy 'in the four lower districts of the Assam Valley, these Bengali immigrant Muslims have quadrupled the Muslim population' (Referred to by Sanjoy Hazarika in *Writing on the Wall: Reflections on the North-East*, 2008, p. 30.) In just one year, 1939–40, the Saadulla government settled Bengali Muslim immigrants on 160,000 bighas of reserve land in the Brahmaputra Valley. Even Saadulla at a particular point opposed Maulana Bhasani's move to throw open all the reserved belts to immigrant Muslim peasants and compared the situation to Palestine being taken over by the Jews.

20. After independence, Saadulla's role in Assam politics was substantially reduced, although as a member of the Constituent Assembly he strongly supported Assam's plea for financial autonomy.

21. ALA proceedings, March 1946, p. 98. Shillong. It is interesting to note that the language of an armed invasion is being used by the Muslim League leader in this context. Amalendu Guha berates the Census Commissioner Mullan for using such language while describing the flow of Bengali–Muslim immigrants into Assam. But in this case a Muslim League legislator was using similar language to describe the 'take-over' of Assam by the immigrants.

22. ALA Proceedings, March 1946, Shillong.

23. Almost four decades later the issue of land and identity and occupation of tribal reserves would receive a new focus during the Assam Movement against foreigners which was launched in December 1979. Even to understand carnages like the one which occurred in Nellie in the aftermath of the controversial elections of 1983, it is necessary to understand the historical underpinnings.

24. The Muslim League's slide towards Pakistan was exceedingly rapid. It had first taken alarm in the summer of 1937; a year later it repudiated the federal scheme of the 1935 Act. By the beginning of 1939 it was considering other constitutional schemes; in September 1939 it declared that the Muslim India was 'irrevocably opposed' to any federal objective. Finally in March 1940, at a session in Lahore, it passed the 'Pakistan resolution' demanding in plain terms the partition of India and the grouping of regions in which Muslims were numerically in the majority, as in the north-western and north-eastern zones, into 'Independent States'. Panderlal Moon, repr., *Divide and Quit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

25. Interestingly, the Land Settlement Act was enacted within a year of the Lahore Resolution of 1940. The salient features of the Land Development Scheme which was merely a strategy to bring in more and more immigrants from Bengal was published in the gazette of December 1940. Though it said that settlement would be confined to immigrants who came before 1938, in effect post-1938 immigrants were accommodated. Refer ALA proceedings of the 1940s.

26. Amalendu Guha, *Panter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), 1977), pp. 281–2; S.P. Desai, ICS, special officer on Land Settlement, reported the forcible occupation of grazing lands by the immigrants in predominantly Assamese and tribal areas. He concluded that there was no surplus land available for new settlements. The Saadulla

government ignored the report and threw open select grazing reserves for immigrant occupation.

27. By the late 1930s the pressure on cultivable land throughout the lower Assam districts was mounting. As already stated, the first wave of immigration was complete by the late 1930s and the large district of Goalpara did not have any surplus land for more immigrants to settle. The immigrants now moved towards Nowgong. ALA debates of the early 1940s throw a lot of light on the growing pressure on cultivable land, the opening up of the reserves and grazing lands by the Saadulla government and the dispossessing of tribals from their belts and blocks.

28. Guha, *Panter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947*, pp. 282–3.

29. Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, p. 93.

30. Phukan, p. 55; Misra, p. 94. *Assam's Attitude to Federalism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1984).

31. Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, p. 92.

32. Misra, pp. 89–90.

33. It may be mentioned that many of the front-ranking leaders of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) were drawn from this organization. Refer to 'Quest for Swadhin Asom' in Misra, *Periphery Strikes Back*, pp. 62–101.

34. Guha, pp. 257, 337. In a Memo to Nehru in 1937, the Asamiya Sanrakshini Sabha said that a purely local issue of immigration had been given a communal colour by the League and the situation was such that 'as a means of saving the Assamese race from extinction, a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia has even expressed their minds in favour of secession from India'.

35. Guha, p. 337.

36. The Lachit Sena, an organization of militant Assamese youths, suddenly made its appearance in January 1968 when it carried out a series of attacks on primarily Marwari business establishments. Even during the period immediately preceding Partition and independence, several small Assamese nationalists groups had made their presence felt. They were demanding the expulsion of all Indians who were looked upon as foreigners and exploiters. For instance, refer letter sent to President, Indian National Congress, J.B. Kripalani, by the All India Marwari Federation, Calcutta on 4 September 1947 (NMML collection).

37. The Chinese advance into the then North East Frontier Agency (Arunachal) and the withdrawal of the Indian Army headquarters from Tezpur to Siliguri combined with what many saw as the virtual abandonment of Assam and the northeastern region in Nehru's broadcast to the

nation, substantially added to the feeling of betrayal. But unlike some of their hill neighbours, the Assamese have always been suffering from the paradox of wanting to be included in the great Indian family and at the same time nursing the feeling of betrayal by India. This perhaps explains the anger and frustration during the Chinese advance into the region on the one hand, and, on the other, the songs eulogizing the Indian soldier written and sung by Bhupen Hazarika which proved immensely popular among the masses. Similarly, during the Assam Movement, which was seen by many as having separatist and secessionist tinges, the main slogan of the All Assam Students Union-All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AASU–AAGSP) combined was 'To Save India Tomorrow, save Assam Today!'

38. Document on Purbachal published by Calcutta Purbachala Committee, 12 December 1948, 14, Bentinck Street, Calcutta (New Delhi: NMML).

39. Ibid.

40. Petition to Gopinath Bardoloi, Chief Minister of Assam, from Bengali residents of Tezpur by Hem Ch. Das et al., 1950 (New Delhi: NMML).

41. Statement of A.G. Roychaudhury, General Secretary, AJM Guwahati, dated 19 June 1950 made during a meeting with Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee who visited Assam in connection with the communal disturbances in the state. See *Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Papers,* File No. 62, (New Delhi: NMML).

42. The *Assam Gazette*, 5 July 1950, Part IX, p. 496, Press Note No. 156 dated 28 June 1950.

43. This decision, along with the one to return Assamese as the mother tongue, was to have far-reaching effects on the amalgamation process of the immigrant Muslim community into the Assamese nationality, thereby bringing about a transformation in the very identity of the Assamese.

44. Refer to the letter written by the Secretary of the Dhubri Bar Association, Ramani Kanta Bose, to Jairamdas Daultaram, Governor of Assam, dated 31 July 1950, *S. P. Mukherjee Papers*.

45. Bengali-Hindu areas in the Brahmaputra Valley were targeted not only during the language riots of 1960 but also during the medium agitation of the 1970s. Finally, during the AAGSP-AASU led anti-foreigner movement of 1979–85 against Muslim infiltrates into Assam, many Bengali-Hindu villages in different parts of the state were also targeted and scores killed. However, of late, relations between the two communities have considerably improved and the earlier antagonism has almost disappeared.

46. *Assam Tribune*, 2 August 1949.

47. *Bihlongani* (Assamese fortnightly) edited by Mahesh Chandra Deva Goswami and published from Nowgong, Issue No. 8, 27-6-1950, *S.P. Mookerjee Papers*, F. No. 62, NMML, New Delhi.

48. The settlement of Bengali refugees in those areas of Assam, Bihar, and Orissa which bordered Bengal was seen as part of a larger conspiracy to create a greater Bengal.

49. Editorial entitled 'Dr. Mookerjee's Sermon', in Mahesh Ch. Dev Goswami (ed.), *Bihlongani*, (Assamese) Nowgong, 8th issue, 27 June 1950. S.P. Mookerjee Papers F. No. 62 (New Delhi: NMML).

50. Even as the communal situation worsened in the Brahmaputra Valley, Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee paid a visit to Assam. He addressed several meetings in Shillong, Guwahati, Pandu, Tezpur, and Nowgong where he called for Assamese–Bengali amity. Referring to this visit, Shri Radha Govinda Baruah, proprietor of the *Assam Tribune*, wrote to Mookerjee that his 'advice to the Bengalees here to give up their separatist tendencies and merge their own interests with those of the people of the province has received province-wide, or better countrywide approval'. (R.G. Baruah's letter to S.P. Mookerjee dated June 27 1950). S.P. Mookerjee's public meeting, presided over by Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, at Nowgong on 21 June 1950, was disrupted because he started his speech in Bengali. Even after he switched over to English, protests from a section of the audience continued and the singing of '*Bande Mataram*' was disrupted. *S.P. Mookherjee Papers*, NMML, New Delhi.

51. Similar demands were also alleged to have been made at a public meeting held at Nowgong in May 1950 and which was presided over by senior Congress leader Haladhar Bhuyan and addressed by, among others, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury and Malin Chandra Bora. *S. P. Mookerjee Papers*.

52. Letter written by Nehru to Bardoloi on 18 May 1949, in S. Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Vol. 12. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1982).

52. Memorandum submitted to Shyama Prasad Mookerjee by the Central Refugee Board, Cachar, 5 June 1950. *S. P. Mookerjee Papers*.

54. Refer to memorandum against the introduction of Assamese as state language given by Ramani Kanta Bose, Secretary, Dhubri Bar Association, to the Governor of Assam. 31 July 1950. New Delhi: NMML.

55. 'Note on the Origin, Nature and History of the Conflict between Bengalees and Asamiyas in Assam', *S. P. Mookerjee Papers*.

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IV Who 'Owns' India?

The Meaning of 'My' in 'My Country'*

This paper attempts to address the question that is often raised: Why is it that many of us living in different parts of our country are not able to acknowledge, in their heart, that India is theirs unlike the rest of us? Now, who are the rest of us and who are they and theirs? The search for an answer to the first question is inextricably linked with the second question. While trying to find out the reason as to why some nationalities living within the Indian republic still do not consider themselves as Indians, we must ask ourselves as to how the Indian state and the people of the rest of the country have been viewing these nationalities. How are these people who have never been part of the 'Indian mainstream' or of the 'great Indian tradition', and who have never taken part in the freedom struggle against the British, to be accommodated within the fabric of the Indian nation as equal partners? How do these nationalities or people view us and our culture and civilization? Have we ever attempted to know their view-point in relation to the people of the rest of the country? Does the concept of India which emerged in the course of the freedom struggle have enough space for the 'others'? Is the image of India which we associate with the national struggle acceptable to the 'others'? Have we been able to create a new image of India in the last 50 years which has enough space for the 'others'? These are fundamental questions which need to be tackled if we are to create an agenda for the country in the twenty first century.

The topic of my essay is suggestive of the fact that more than 50 years after achieving freedom from British rule, we have not been able to resolve what may be called the basic inconsistency between the conception of the modern nation-state and the pervasive reality of the

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polyethnic or multinational character of our country. On the contrary, the past two decades or so have seen an intensification of conflicts and contradictions among different ethnic groups and communities which have been demanding either a greater share in the overall process of government or asking for independent entities for themselves. Initially, the Indian state viewed these movements as challenges to the nation-building process which necessitated a hard-line approach. But the persistence of these movements in the face of severe state repression led to serious rethinking on all planes and today it is generally acknowledged that the demands for greater autonomy or even secession from the Indian state, need to be seen against the background of the failure of governmental policies to involve the masses in the process of government as also the non-percolation of the development benefits to the grass-roots level. Such a failure to involve the masses in the nation-building process at various levels has resulted in a sense of alienation amongst many ethnic communities and groups.

It is a generally accepted fact that it is the sense of belonging amongst the people which goes a long way in building a nation. The important poser for all of us today is whether this sense of belonging to the country is shared equally by the different nationalities and communities which constitute what is known as the Indian nation. If not, then what has gone wrong? Is the idea of the Indian nation being gradually appropriated by a certain section of people living in the Hindi-Hindu heartland, thereby leading to an increasing sense of separateness particularly in regions where a substantially large segment of the people nourish a feeling of distinctness of culture and tradition unrelated to the Indian 'mainstream'? For someone belonging to that part of the country which may be termed a periphery for a variety of reasons, say the northeastern region, the answer to who 'owns' the country or what is the 'my' of 'my country' may turn out to be very different from the one given by a person who is an integral part of what may be rather loosely termed as the Indian cultural system or the Indian ethos.

Whether one accepts the position that a nation emerges out of a process of sociopolitical awareness amongst a particular community of people or whether it is a cultural construct imagined into existence (to 'think' a nation, in Benedict Anderson's words), the fact remains that a sense of belonging or a corporate will is a basic criteria in both building a nation and in holding it together. This consciousness is marked by

what has been termed by Anderson as a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' among citizens, irrespective of the actual inequality and exploitation they may be prevalent (Anderson 1983, 16). This sense of belonging is, in turn, dependant quite often on the sharing of a particular cultural system. Anderson makes a valid point when he says that nationalism has to be understood 'by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies but with the large cultural system that preceded it and out of which as well as against which it came into being' (Anderson 1983, 19). This argument assumes a lot of weight when we try to understand the position of ethnic nationalities like the Nagas, or the Mizos, or the Arunachali tribes in relation to the Indian nation-state and the broad culture system which nourishes it. One of the relevant points that would naturally come up for discussion in this context is whether in the past 50 years the Indian nation-state has been able to broaden the parameters of the immensely rich and diverse cultural systems which it inherited, to include those communities which, till recently, were either on the periphery or were never part of this framework. Without being drawn in at this stage into the rather contentious issue of the attempt by a section of the intelligentsia to appropriate the cultural system to further their own limited view of the Indian nation, I would like to focus on certain salient features which tend to mark the attitude of the different ethnic nationalities and groups towards the concept of India as a nation. Only then would we be in a position to understand the sense of separateness which the northeastern tribal communities feel vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state and be able to assess the factors which have been preventing the growth of the sense of belonging which is so very central to the growing of a national mindset or consciousness.

The socio-historical factors which even today make it difficult for many ethnic nationalities of the northeastern part of the country to accept India as their own country are indeed many. Historically, the Nagas, or the Mizos, or the Arunachali tribes have had very little to share with the rest of the subcontinent. Even the British, who were responsible for bringing the greater part of the country under one administrative set-up which in turn brought in a sense of geographical and political oneness which was never there before, were hesitant to extend their administration to the Naga Hills or present-day Arunachal because it was not considered profitable to do so. Unlike in other parts of the country, in the northeast the British cannot be credited with bring-

ing the entire region under one administration, thereby consolidating the process of state building. Large areas of the northeastern region were virtually untouched by the British administration and regarded as 'Unadministered Areas'. Moreover, the Inner Line Regulations which were introduced with the Bengal Frontier Regulations of 1873 made interaction between the people of the hills and the plains of then undivided Assam quite difficult. The government invested itself with the power to prohibit 'any subject living outside the area from living or moving therein'. Although the Inner Line Regulations were first applied to the Naga Hills, these were later extended to cover all the hill areas except the Khasi, Garo, and Mikir Hills. The introduction of the Inner Line Regulations virtually cut off the hills from the rest of British India.

The Inner Line Regulations were followed by a series of other regulations like Section 52 A of the Government of India Act of 1919 which declared most of the hill areas of Assam as 'backward areas' where the application of any legislative act was prohibited. Moreover, the Simon Commission recommended in 1930 that 'the backward tracts should be excluded from the province of Assam and be administered by the Governor-in-Council as the agent of the Governor General-in-Council'. The Government of India Act 1935 made further provision for the exclusion of the hill areas from the influence of the plains by regrouping the 'backward areas' into 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas over which the provincial legislature of Assam would have no jurisdiction, although these areas would officially be administered as parts of the province of Assam.

The exclusion of the hill areas from the plains was of two-fold advantage to the British. While, on the one hand, the expense of administering the hill areas, where revenue earnings were low, could be kept at a minimum by maintaining just a semblance of administration, on the other hand, the flow of sociopolitical ideas from the rest of the country could be effectively checked.[1] The different regulations were clearly a part of the colonial strategy to deliberately and consciously keep the ethnic nationalities segregated from the influence of what may be termed broadly as the Indian cultural tradition. This policy was so successful that apart from the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, the hill nationalities of the entire northeastern region were virtually untouched by the Indian freedom movement. Even at the time of the transfer of power, there was a definite and well-thought-out plan to establish

a 'Crown Colony' by bringing together the hill areas of Assam and Burma. It is against such a background that the demand for autonomy within the Indian Union or for an independent status outside India being raised by some of the ethnic nationalities must be viewed. The initial response of the Indian state towards the Naga Movement was a flawed one precisely because it was marked by a lack of understanding of the socio-historical factors which determined the Naga's image of his homeland and his inability to link himself with 'the idea of India' and 'its modern national culture' (Chatterjee, 6). This also partly explains why the Naga Movement, unlike many other movements for autonomy in post-independence India, cannot be linked with distinct economic factors related to uneven development or relative deprivation. When the Naga talked of his country he did possess an idea of it, however utopian this may appear to some. The idea of a Naga homeland has been put forward succinctly by one of the pioneers of the Naga struggle, T. Sakhrie:[2]

> Truly we are a peculiar people. We are all equal. Men and women have an equal status. We have no caste divisions ... no high class or low class of people ... We believe in that form of democratic government which permits the rule not of the majority but of the people as a whole. We have no land tax, no wine tax, no water tax. Forest, rivers and woodland belong to the people for their exploitation without paying taxes ... We have no beggars ... And wonder of wonders, we have no jails ...We do not arrest or imprison anybody ... We fear nobody, individually or collectively. We are a healthy people and fear corrupts the health of man. We talk freely, live freely and often fight freely too. We have no inhibitions of any kind ... Wild? Yes ... but free. There is order in this chaos, law in this freedom. If I were to choose a country, it would be my Nagaland, my fair Nagaland again and again.

This is obviously the picture of a tribal utopia which does not conform to the actual ground reality of present-day Nagaland. Nevertheless, it holds up the picture of a distinct homeland for the Nagas and a society which contrasts sharply with that of the rest of the country. It was through the efforts of Phizo and his NNC that the different tribes who did not even possess a common language and were often on antagonistic relations with one another, were welded together to form what is today referred to as the Naga nation.[3] This newly-emerging

'nation' which had neither seen economic development under British rule nor had been involved in any mass struggle along with the people of the neighbouring regions, was thus psychologically quite unprepared to enter the Indian Union in 1947. This is exactly what the leaders of newly independent India, barring a few, could not comprehend, let alone appreciate.

As the Indian leaders set about building the nation-state, still deeply infused with the ideas of nationalism strengthened and rejuvenated by the struggle against colonial rule, they were taken aback when some communities and ethnic nationalities refused to accept their notion of nationalism and the nation-state. It needs to be noted that this seems to be quite a common phenomenon with a newly-emerging polyglot nation which often tends to adopt nationalist policies which tend to identify the 'nation' with the state, thereby relegating to the background the claims to 'nationhood' by other people with the state structure who do not identify themselves within the prevailing idea of the nation (Stavenhagen 1990, 29).

Indian nationalist leaders were, therefore, not attuned to appreciate the demand of the Nagas who insisted that since they were outside the ambit of 'Indian nationalism', they be allowed to shape their own destiny. To counter this demand, there was no dearth of the viewpoint which stressed that these tribes had always been part of the great Indian tradition, mention having been made of them in the ancient scriptures and that in the course of the process of modernization, these little traditions would eventually be assimilated into the nation-state, As B.K. Roy Burman has rightly pointed out:

> In the little tradition-great tradition framework, there is an unstated assumption of the superiority of the reflective elements of culture. But one would wonder if there is any sociological or historical justification of this assumption ... Freedom is total. We cannot free ourselves from outside domination and sustain freedom, without permeating the values of freedom in every sphere of our life. Many anthropologists have failed to grasp the meaning of this historic shift. Like the proverbial black cat which does exist in the hall, they carry their pathetic search for Sanskritisation no matter they are the Apa Tani or the Onge. And when they do not find it, they start their angry witch hunting. They seek scapegoats either in the "conspiracy" of the missionaries or in the "foolishness" of the makers of the Indian

> Constitution. They ignore an emerging spectra in the world horizon, namely ethnicity based convulsion. (Burman 1994, 110–12)

Therefore, it was but natural that most of the Indian leaders brought up in the 'great Indian tradition' were not in a position to appreciate the consistent demand of the NNC(and by Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) later on), that since the Nagas never formed part of the Indian nation they should have freedom to have an independent homeland, and that their movement cannot be termed as a secessionist one. For these leaders, the Naga position on 'self-determination' was an anti-national one and the Naga struggle was a direct challenge to the nation and state building process in independent India.

There were, however, some exceptions. Amongst those who tried to appreciate the Naga point of view and accommodate them within the liberal democratic framework of the new nation were Gandhi, Nehru, and Jayaprakash Narayan. When talks between the NNC and the Government of India broke down over the interpretation of a particular clause of the Hydari Agreement, Phizo, along with five compatriots, met Gandhiji on 19 July 1947. This is what Gandhiji is reported to have told the Naga delegation:

> The Nagas have every right to be independent. We did not want to live under the domination of the British and they are now leaving. I want you to feel that India is yours. But if you say that it is not mine, the matter must stop there. I believe in the brotherhood of man, but I do not believe in force or forced unions. If you do not wish to join the Union of India, nobody will force you to do that.[4]

Naga historians refer to this meeting quite often saying that Gandhiji was one of those few Indian who tried to understand the Naga psyche.

Nehru too seemed quite sensitive to the position taken up by the Nagas. This is adequately reflected in his letters to T. Sakhrie, the general secretary of the NNC during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. In a letter written to Sakhrie in August 1946, Nehru states that the 'Naga territory' should, for historical and strategic reasons, join India. Nehru was clearly in favour of a political solution of the Naga issue and he had assured the Nagas a large measure of autonomy as well as constitutional safeguards within the Indian Union.[5] It is an irony of history that it was during Nehru's prime ministership that the maximum state repression was let loose on the Naga people. Yet, it was largely because

of his vision that a separate political space in the form of the state of Nagaland could be created. Another Indian leader who sincerely tried to understand and appreciate the Naga point of view regarding their homeland was Jayaprakash Narayan. As a member of the Naga Peace Mission, Jayaprakash Narayan went on record as saying that the Naga struggle was 'most certainly a struggle for national freedom' and that it could be viewed in the correct perspective only when seen in the context of self-governing states.

Once the nationality issue in the Naga struggle was acknowledged, the Indian nation-state started its attempts to accommodate the wishes of the Naga people as best as it could within the ambit of the Indian constitution. The creation of the state of Nagaland in December 1963 and the holding of successful elections ushered in a separate era of politics in Nagaland and marked the beginning of a new relationship of the Naga people with the Indian Union. By accepting, even if partially, the Naga people's demand to be given the right to forge their own destiny, the Constitution of India proved its resilience as well as its accommodative power. The successful involvement of the Naga people in running their own state with a large measure of autonomy is surely one of the success stories of the Indian democratic system. This has been possible only because there has been an attempt to appreciate the Naga point of view as far as the question of 'my country' is concerned. The same may be said about the Mizo uprising under Laldenga and the subsequent involvement of the Mizo people in administering themselves.

The question, therefore, naturally arises that, given the large cultural divide between the Naga and the average Indian, how far would the former accept the idea of India as his own country? Obviously the Naga would find it difficult to identify himself with a monolithic Indian nation-state harping on 'the great Indian tradition' and leaving little space for plurality of cultures and viewpoints. He would naturally associate such an exclusivist India with caste-ridden social hierarchies, female infanticide, dowry deaths, obscurantist beliefs and practices and untold feudal oppression. He would be confused and put off when he reads in the newspapers that a widow of sectarian violence is forced to marry her eight-year-old brother-in-law because her in-laws wanted the compensation money to stay within the family; or when he reads that in one year alone there have been more than 1,300 cases of female infanticide in the state of Tamil Nadu alone; or that every year there

are thousands of dowry deaths and dowry-related suicides in the country. This India is completely alien to him. For, in his own homeland, notwithstanding the long-drawn insurgency and the attendant violence, certain egalitarian values still hold despite the swift social changes that have been taking place. The picture drawn by Sakhrie about his homeland may have been utopian and idealistic, but much of the spirit behind those words could still have a ring of relevance for the average Naga.

It is seldom that one pauses to consider the viewpoint of the 'other'. What would be the nature of the 'gaze back'? Wouldn't the 'undeveloped' and 'backward' tribal recoil from the built-in structures of exploitation and oppression of the 'mainstream' society? By this, however, one is not surely implying that the tribal society and the tribal world view are without their own limitations. While discussing the tribal world view, one needs to keep in mind this view could prove very constrictive and xenophobic to many. The experience of the non-tribals in many of the states of the northeastern region bears out this fact. Therefore, to help the tribal to overcome the limitations of his world view, one must offer a better alternative in the form of a modern, secular, social set-up where the state ensures social and economic security and where the sanctity of their collective identity as well as individual freedom is maintained. A more attractive alternative must be offered in the form of an educated, healthy, socially secure, and democratic society. For these nationalities to be able to identify themselves with the idea of India, it would be necessary to draw on the strong eclectic and inclusive nature of what may be termed as the broad Indian cultural tradition and resist the exclusivist view of national unity. Social, linguistic, and regional plurality must be seen as essential to the task of nation-building and the political model must be made more pluralist, participatory, and federal in character. Thus, instead of trying to bulldoze the 'other' into accepting *our* world view and social values, it would be necessary to prepare the ground for a new national consciousness to be based on multiculturalism and egalitarian values.

It is being said that the different ethnic nationalities of the northeastern region are being drawn into the 'mainstream' because their emerging middle classes have been developing stakes in the Indian market; in reality, the fight against 'separatism' in these areas is being fought by the Indian state through its market forces. It would, however, be a much more positive thing if these ethnic nationalities were

to be involved meaningfully in the nation-building process through their participation in a pluralist, federal, political system. They must be made part of the different social movements for justice and equal opportunities that are going on in the country at present and the fruits of development must reach the grassroots level. Those areas which were untouched by the freedom struggle and are even so today, in more senses than one, on the periphery, must be brought within the ambit of participatory democracy built on a truly federal and decentralized structure. Instead of harping on the oneness of our culture which only helps to further distance those who have not been part of it, it would be meaningful if stress were laid on developmental programmes related to health, literacy, sports, and games, and so on . For instance, the Naga footballer, Dr Telimeren Ao, who led the Indian football team to the Olympics, helped a great deal to bring Nagaland closer to the rest of the country. Similarly, Manipur boxer Dinko Singh's winning a gold for India at the recently concluded Asian Games has sent waves of jubilation throughout Manipur, known otherwise for its refusal to accept the merger with India. Also, programmes like the Pulse Polio Immunization Programme (easily one of the largest such programmes in the world) bring the country so much closer. Thus, the idea of India as 'my country' must emerge through constructive work and the acceptance of plurality rather than by emphasizing what is referred to as our 'timeless heritage'. This glorification of a nebulous past tends to divert the people's attention from the immediate, pressing issues like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and homelessness.

The perception of India as a country must be broadened to include those nationalities which have been at the periphery, culturally, politically, and economically. Irfan Habib, in a recent article entitled 'The Formation of India: Notes on the History of an Idea' while tracing the growth of the 'idea of India' from the Mauryan times till the present, refers to the role of the social-reform movements during the freedom struggle in enlarging the concept of 'my country'. He says that though some prerequisites of nationhood like geographical oneness, cultural entity, and political unification had emerged by the time of the British conquests which began with the Battle of Plassey in 1757, yet these were not enough to mould India into a nation. What was needed was, in his words, a 'mass diffusion of the sense of belonging to one's country, pervasive of other loyalties' plus the 'existence of a feeling widely

shared that the country must be governed by those belonging to it'. Habib says:

> What perception existed of India as a country, a cultural and political unit, until the 19th century was one largely confined to the upper strata, the townsmen, traders, scholars and the like. It did not moreover override a series of parochial identities. With his great insight Ram Mohun Roy noted in a letter in 1830 that India could not yet be called a nation, because its people were "divided among castes".

He goes on to discuss how the social reform movements by expanding the realm of reason and inter-religious unity under the banner of monotheism and by condemning the oppression of women and barriers of caste, provided the building blocks of India's nationhood. It was on this foundation that Gandhiji built his rurally oriented constructive programmes which diffused modern ideas and social values amongst the masses, thereby accelerating the sweep of national consciousness (Habib, 8–9).

This process seems to have come to a halt after Gandhiji's death. Though in the post-independence period, there have been several sociopolitical mass movements aimed at restoring social values eaten away by corruption and nepotism in public life at all possible levels, for instance the Nava Nirman Movement or the Total Revolution call by Jayaprakash Narayan, these have not been able to involve the people of the entire country. The democratization of the polity up to the grassroots level could necessitate social movement on a countrywide scale. Only then would we be able to broaden the perception of 'my India' to include the entire people of the country. The criminalization of politics and the rampant corruption in public life is increasingly strengthening the feeling among all those marginalized sections that the country is being appropriated by a small coterie who claims to own India. And it is this section, cutting across ideological barriers, which raise the bogey of the country and its culture being in danger whenever questions of social justice and equality are raised. It is this very section which tries to dismiss as anti-national the demands for autonomy and self-rule of the different ethnic nationalities of the country while rejecting the polyethnic and poly-cultural ethos of the new India.

I have referred to the case of Nagaland in relation to the Indian nation because the Naga struggle was the first major challenge to the nation-

building process in post-independence India and is today the longest surviving insurgency. It has succeeded in raising certain central issues about the nation-state and has compelled serious rethinking regarding the concept of 'my India'. The different ethnic struggles of the north-eastern region have led to the revaluation of the entire thesis of nation-building and a review of the relationships of the federating units of a multinational state with one another as well as with the Centre. In the light of the experience of the northeastern region, the entire thesis on development and modernization had to be reviewed and new parameters discovered. Those who wished to carry over the nationalism of the Independence period into a space which had not been covered by the freedom struggle were soon to realize that the nationalism of the pre-independence period and that of the post-independence period had to be substantially different. Here we are dealing with people who are in the process of becoming a part of India without self-consciously involving themselves in the struggle for independence. Therefore, attempts at 'national integration' are bound to meet with a great deal of resistance from these people, especially if attempts are made to override ethnic diversity and impose a homogeneous set of values.

That such attempts could prove counterproductive is nowhere better illustrated than in the growth of a strong secessionist movement in Assam. Assam, which has had centuries-old historical and cultural ties with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, was actively engaged in the freedom struggle led by Gandhi and the Congress. There have been moments in Assam's recent history when the province's relationships with the central government have come under severe strain. Yet, in times of grave crisis it has always opted for India.[6] For the average Assamese the term 'mor desh' (my country) has been undergoing changes in the last one hundred years or so. Till Independence, 'mor desh' and 'mor jati' meant Assam and the Assamese. When Lakshminath Bezbaroa composed what is considered today as the national song of the Assamese, 'O' Mor Aponar Desh', he was obviously referring to Assam. But under the impact of the freedom struggle the idea of 'mor desh' gradually came to include India, while Assam or Asom came to be referred to as 'pradesh'. Some writers, however, continued to refer to the Assamese jati and India as the 'mahajati' in the 'mahadesh'.

This is being said to underline the fact that Assam's integration, culturally and historically, with the rest of the country appeared quite com-

plete. From the point of view of the religion and culture of the majority of the people of Assam, it may be said that they belong to what may be said as the broad Indian cultural stream, the many major points of distinctness notwithstanding. But, owing to a number of reasons which is beyond the scope of this paper to examine, Assam today is engulfed by a violent movement aimed at seceding from the Indian state. There are strong historical factors to suggest that what is happening in Assam today is the fallout of the failure of the Indian nation-state to ensure equitable distribution of resources and to impart that sense of belonging to the broad masses of the Assamese people. Years of neglect by the Centre and insensitivity to Assamese public opinion have alienated a large segment of the people who are now questioning the region's links with the rest of the country.

Given the strong cultural and historical links which Assam has had with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, what is happening today seems to pose a greater threat to the nation-building process than the events in Nagaland or some other parts of the northeastern region. Why is it that history is being doctored and reinterpreted today by the militant groups in an attempt to prove that India is not 'my country' and that it never was? Why is it that the appeal of an independent Assam or '*Swadhin Asom*' is finding some degree of response among the people and a new nation is being imagined into existence? The very fact that the idea of an independent Asom has caught the imagination even of a small segment of the people should be seen as great challenge to the entire nation-building process. How far this will succeed will depend on the accommodative power of the Indian state. This is exactly why the question of who 'owns' India and what is the 'my' in 'my country' assumes great relevance.

In conclusion, one would like to reiterate that in order to keep the nation together and instill the sense of belonging among those nationalities which are tending to drift apart or are refusing to participate in the nation-building process, it would be necessary to redefine the present, commonly held concepts of the Indian nation and enlarge its parameters to include all those who are still on the periphery. This would necessitate not only a multicultural approach and a conscious effort to do away with the 'ours-theirs' divide, but also call for a wide scale people's movements throughout the country against social injustices and inequalities. Those who are struggling for their linguistic or

cultural identity must be made to realize that their movements would acquire wider dimensions and sharper edges if linked with the struggles of the dispossessed and the socially oppressed in other parts of the country. Rajni Kothari has rightly pointed out that once the logic of development gets overpowered by the logic of technology, development ceases to be an instrument of social justice and democracy. And, when development is cut off from the people and their roots, it results in the exploitation of the people and their natural base, resulting in 'two Indias'—one with access to resources, power and privileges, and the other totally left out of it all (Kothari, 396). It is this concept of 'two Indias' that is to be rejected through grassroots movements aimed at restoring value-based politics. It is precisely through social action that those who see themselves as being outside the fold of the Indian nation are to be brought into it. What is called for is less talk of national integration and *'Mera Bharat Mahaan'* and more emphasis on constructive rural-based programmes as envisaged by Gandhiji. Only through such mass-based struggles for social reconstruction can the very concept of the Indian nation be redefined and reshaped to meet modern needs.

Notes

1. The British extended their administrative control of the hills in so much as was necessary to protect their economic interests primarily in the resource-rich plains of Assam.

2. These words are also attributed to Angami Zapo Phizo by some scholars.

3. The Naga nation which merged through the coming together of different tribes naturally has its own fault lines. But that does not take away from the fact that there is a common Naga consciousness which overrides all other factors.

4. Though no account of this meeting is to be found in Gandhi's papers, S.K. Chaube quotes it in an article entitled 'The Naga Revolt' published in the *Spectator* of 14 September 1962.

5. Refer Nehru's letters to the Assam Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library [NMML]).

6. For instance, during the Cabinet Mission Plan when the region almost went to Pakistan or during the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 when it was almost abandoned by New Delhi.

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Chapter 2

COURSE AND CHARACTER OF THE NAGA STRUGGLE

I Introduction

The essays in this section deal with the movement for Nagalim which is not only amongst the earliest challenges to the Indian nation-state but also the longest surviving ethnic armed struggle in the subcontinent. From the late 1970s, when the first among the essays in this collection was published, till the present day, plenty of changes have occurred and new social and political equations have emerged. For instance, movements for self-determination and even independence which began at the time of independence, such as the Naga struggle, have moved far away from their stated goals and their ideology and are today mired in internecine conflict, forced extortions that go in the name of 'taxes', and a confused road ahead. Leading Naga intellectual and writer, Temsula Ao sums this up succinctly in her introduction to her volume of short stories where she says: 'Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome'.[1] The idealism and fervent nationalism which Temsula Ao refers to is perhaps best illustrated in the brief essay, 'Portrait of a Naga "Hostile"'. In today's Nagaland, the likes of Imkongmeren Ao[2] would be anachronisms.

The origins and growth of Naga nationalism, the pioneering role of Angami Zapo Phizo, the sacrifices and sufferings of the Naga people in their sustained fight against a powerful Indian state, the gradual rise of tribalism within the movement, the resultant split in the Naga National Council (NNC) and the emergence of the National Socialist Council of

Nagaland (NSCN), further splits and fratricidal killings, peace talks with the Government of India which continue to drag on for over a decade, the role of civil society—all this and much more now form the history and collective memory of the Naga people. Civil society in Nagaland has long been debating the aberrations within the movement and its failure to create a really cohesive Naga identity, even though the main base of Naga nationalism as it emerged out of the longest insurgent movement in India's post-independence history, remains intact. Today, the question of reconciliation amongst the different tribes seems to have become the primary factor in Naga politics, with issues like the integration of all Naga-inhabited areas or securing maximum autonomy within a loose federal set-up, being gradually pushed to the margins. The issue of Naga sovereignty has long been compromised by all the Naga insurgent groups which seem preoccupied with the task of holding on to their areas of influence and consolidating them. Hence, the occasional violent turf wars between the two factions of the NSCN which have claimed scores of lives. As for the 15-year peace talks between the National Socialist Council of Nagaland ([Isaac-Muivah] [NSCN I–M]) and the Centre, there seems to be a virtual deadlock with the Government of India refusing to accept the core demands relating to the integration of contiguous Naga areas as also a special status for Nagaland in a reworked federal relationship.[3]

New political equations have emerged in Nagaland since the peace talks with the NSCN (I–M) began and the position of the latter as the chief negotiator on behalf of the Naga people has been progressively eroded. In today's scenario in Nagaland, no single insurgent group, however powerful it might be, can really claim to represent the wishes and aspirations of the people as a whole. Moreover, it would be wrong to treat the Nagas as one homogeneous whole. The strength of Naga society lies in the variety of its tribes and their distinct traditional structures which have combined under a particular historical process to give shape to a clear Naga identity. Therefore, it would be a grave mistake to try to merge all these distinct identities under the umbrella of any one particular organization. The very democratic structure of Naga society, made up as it is with so many tribes, would not permit this. That New Delhi would try to play on the distinctness of the tribes is, however, a separate matter. As it is, New Delhi is obviously taking advantage of the demands being raised by the other Naga insurgent groups that a

solution to the Naga issue must not be confined to the NSCN (I–M) only but must also involve all of them. The future of the Naga movement has been further complicated by the demand raised for a separate state under the banner of the Eastern Naga People's Union (ENPU).[4] This is bound to throw a spanner on the demand raised by the NSCN (I–M) for the integration of all Naga-inhabited areas. The essays on Nagaland in this collection touch upon many of these issues. Many may question the relevance of these essays in the changed political situation, especially when the Naga struggle has been partly appropriated by the Indian state and has also been overtaken by market forces. But since these essays were written as responses to certain historical situations, perhaps one could find them useful in arriving at a comprehensive understanding of the course and content of the Naga struggle. While the essays relating to the rise of Naga nationalism written in the late 1970s try to analyse the factors behind the rise of Naga nationalism and the pivotal role of the NNC, the one on alternate voices in the Naga movement, written more recently, tries to focus on the lack of inner-party democracy among the militant movements and their inability to tackle and accommodate discordant voices.[5] This, one feels, has been one of the major factors which has led to the cul-de-sac in which the Naga movement finds itself now. Just as the swiftly changing international scenario of the 1990s prompted the NSCN (I-M) to open a dialogue with New Delhi and try to work out a solution to the Naga issue through meaningful negotiations, similarly the present situation both in Nagaland and in the country as a whole calls for a relook at questions relating to the territorial integration of Naga-inhabited areas, inter-tribe contradictions and the Naga people's relations with their neighbours. The Naga movement and the Naga national question itself is passing through a crucial phase and the complexities that have surfaced make it not only a learning experience for the Naga people but also for the Indian nation-state.

Notes

1. Temsula Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), p. x.

2. Imkongmeren Ao was one of the founder-members of the Naga National Council and remained its Vice-President for many years. A close

confidante of Phizo, Imkongmeren was known for his simple life-style and deep commitment to his cause. He represented some of the best values of Naga life and society.

3. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reportedly ruled out the core demands of the NSCN (I–M) during a meeting with Nagaland Chief Minister, Neiphiu Rio. *The Telegraph,* Kolkata, 18 April 2012.

4. Four districts of eastern Nagaland—Tuensang, Mon, Longleng, and Kiphire—inhabited by the Chang, Konyak, Sangtam, Khiamniungan, Yimchunger, and Phom tribes have placed a demand for a separate state called 'Frontier Nagaland'.

5. The essay 'CPI and the Naga Struggle' has been included to show that among all the political parties, it was the CPI alone which had tried to analyse the Naga national question. But the Naga Movement at no stage thought it necessary to take the Left into confidence. Ethnic politics and a class-based ideology did not go together. Moreover, the strong influence that the Church exerted on Naga politics made the Naga leadership allergic to communists of all shades.

II The Naga National Question*

Throughout their nearly 30 years of struggle against the Government of India, the Naga National Council (NNC), the political wing of the underground Naga Federal Government has consistently maintained that the Nagas constitute an independent nation. The NNC claims that, except for a century of British rule, the Nagas had never been subjugated and ruled by any other people and 'had never been part of what today constitutes the Indian nation.[1] This feeling of separateness from the rest of the Indian state is so widely shared by the Nagas that it may be said to be one of the prime forces in their long struggle against a powerful adversary. That the Nagas have successfully carried on one of the most protracted armed struggles in the subcontinent, has drawn serious national and international attention to their cause. Till the not-too-distant past there had been a tendency to dismiss the Naga

* First published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIII, No. 14, 8 April 1978.

struggle as a secessionist movement inspired and aided by foreign missionaries who have been exploiting the fierce feeling for independence of the hill people to break up the Indian 'nation'. In this context, it has also been frequently asserted that there is no such base for Naga nationalism, because the Nagas are made up of at least 14 tribes who have no common language and are constantly hostile towards one another.[2] But the persistence of the Naga struggle against desperate odds has done away with most of these pet arguments which have been based on ignorance of the Naga way of life. Today, it is admitted by even their most bitter critics, that their long struggle has given the Nagas a cohesiveness and a sense of national unity to which very few nationalities of the Indian subcontinent can lay claim.[3]

The Naga's loyalty to his tribe or clan is being gradually replaced by his loyalty to the concept of united Nagaland which will include all the Naga-inhabited territory between the Chindwin in Burma and the Brahmaputra in Assam.[4] This demand for a 'greater Nagaland' is clearly linked with the growing tide of Naga nationalism which has succeeded in greatly reducing, if not altogether doing away with, inter-tribe and inter-clan rivalry and differences. This development, from tribe and clan organization to the idea of a sovereign Naga state comprising the entire Naga nation, has been helped immensely by the Naga's intensely deep attachment to his native soil and to common local traditions.[5] Foreign occupation of their land has always been fiercely opposed by the different Naga tribes and all recorded history of the Nagas reveals this.

To the Ahoms who ruled Assam from the middle of the thirteenth century, the Naga Hills had plenty of strategic importance, for 'it was through the land of the Nagas of Patkoi and the Tirap Division of NEFA that the Ahoms came to Assam over the Patkoi mountain and it was this route that they had to use in maintaining their relations with their kith and kin in Burma'.[6] Thus, the Ahoms kept a close watch on their frontier with the Nagas and succeeded in keeping them under control. The Ahom policy towards the Nagas was marked by conciliation backed by force, but the Ahom rulers never had any plans for the conquest and annexation of the territories of the Naga tribes. Although the Ahom kings carried out numerous punitive expeditions against the Naga tribes who so very frequently raided the villages on the Assam plains, they realized fully well that to interfere with the internal administration of the Nagas would be hazardous.

> The Ahom rulers considered it enough to receive the submission of the Nagas, and to allow them to enjoy their tribal autonomy, so long as the Nagas living near the plains, who were granted revenue-free lands and fishing-waters along with retainers in the plains, did not raid Ahom territories and the Nagas on the India-Burma frontier did not ally themselves with the enemies of the Ahoms beyond the Patkoi range to jeopardise the Ahom kingdom.[7]

This acknowledgement of non-interference in Naga affairs resulted in a cordiality and understanding between the Nagas and the Assamese living on the borders of the Naga Hills and an active barter trade flourished.[8] As Ahom power declined towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the Naga tribes once again asserted their complete independence from foreign control, however limited that might have been, and those tribes who had been paying tributes to the Ahom kings ceased to do so. Thus, in summing up Ahom–Naga relations, one may say that while the Nagas submitted to the strength of the Ahom rulers, the latter respected the Nagas' love for independence and desisted from interfering in their internal affairs.

The British, too, in the initial years of their rule in Assam, followed a policy of non-interference in Naga affairs. After taking advantage of the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) and annexing Assam, the British speedily consolidated their hold over the fertile valley area. But they followed a policy of cautious non-interference towards the hill tribes, especially the Nagas. This was not, as the British later conveniently claimed to 'protect' the hill people from being exploited by the unscrupulous plainsmen, but because the annexation of the hill areas was not considered profitable. The Nagas first came into contact with the British in 1832, when Captain Jenkins and his men marched through the Angami territory on their way to the Assam plains from Manipur. From 1835 to 1851 as many as 10 punitive expeditions were carried out by the British, mainly directed to put an end to the Angami raids into the plains of Assam. After the tenth expedition in December 1850, a policy of non-interference was clearly laid down and the troops were withdrawn. There is evidence of this in Lord Dalhousie's Minute, wherein it is stated:

> I dissent entirely from the policy which is recommended of what is called obtaining control, that is to say, of taking possession of these hills, and of establishing sovereignty over their savage inhabitants. Our possessions could bring no profit to us, and would be as costly to us as it would be

> unproductive... As it is impolitic to contemplate the permanent possession of these hills, so it seems to me impolitic to sanction temporary possession of them.[9]

This policy continued till around 1862, when Cecil Beadon took over as the Lieutenant Governor and the British started to devise means for bringing the Nagas under their political control in order to put an end to the incursions on the plains. In 1874, Captain Johnstone informed the Chief Commissioner that he had 'formally taken under [our] protection on payment of revenue two Naga villages which were in immediate danger of attack, and had ordered the other hostile villages to leave them alone'.[10] The British occupation of Naga Hills had begun. Although the Chief Commissioner agreed with Captain Johnstone, the highest authorities showed disapproval because such a step 'may involve us (the British) in the reduction of the country by degrees to a regular system of government regardless of expenses'.[11] Despite such hesitation, a 'forward policy' was finally resolved upon which culminated in the British occupation of Kohima on 14 November 1878. This was followed by the speedy consolidation of British rule in the Naga Hills. In 1881, the Naga Hills District was established.[12] It may be mentioned in this connection that the British occupation of the Naga Hills was mostly confined to the area covering central Nagaland, with most areas bordering Burma and Tibet being left almost completely un-administered. The Nagas, particularly the Angamis, put up their last fierce resistance to the British in 1879–80 when they laid siege to Kohima for 11 days. This attack was mainly led by 13 Angami village-states along with that of Khonoma.[13] The failure of the Naga attempt to oust the British from their soil may be traced to the lack of unity and the absence of a common organised political authority among the various Naga tribes. At this time, the Nagas were living in their isolated sovereign village-states, each independent of the other and, more often than not, on hostile terms. With the British occupation of the Naga Hills, the Nagas for the first time had to accept an alien power as their ruler right in the midst of their territory. Till then they had only faced punitive expeditions and had developed their own pattern of guerilla tactics to deal with such expeditions. Thus, the British conquest wrought far-reaching changes in the Naga sociopolitical set-up and we shall have occasion to discuss some of these changes in the course of the article.

The British took care not to tamper with the tribal pattern of village democracy prevalent in the Naga Hills. By acknowledging the right of the tribal councils as the sole authority to deal with Naga affairs (providing, of course, for interference in exceptional cases) and by isolating the hills from the plains by introducing regulations, the British succeeded in keeping the Nagas cut off from the rest of the subcontinent. Thus, it is not surprising that the Nagas were not in any way drawn into the anti-British struggle led by the Congress and they were practically untouched by the force of Indian nationalism.[14] Therefore, when on the eve of the British departure from India the British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act and the Extra-Provincial Jurisdiction Act empowering the new Indian government to continue its administration in the Naga Hills, the Nagas were caught off their guard. They discovered that they had been made a unit of the Indian Union without their consent being sought. The Nagas were psychologically least prepared for such a union. It is precisely this devolution of power which was questioned by the NNC. As early as in 1929, the Naga Club[15] had submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission demanding that the Nagas be excluded from the scope of the proposed constitutional changes and be kept under the direct administration of the British. In its memorandum, the Naga Club had stated: 'You [the British] are the only people who have ever conquered us and when you go we should be as we were'. Demanding adequate safeguards from any possible rule by the Indians, the memorandum concluded with the following plea: 'If the British Government, however, want to throw us away, we pray: that we should not be thrust to the mercy of the people who could never have conquered us themselves, and to whom we were never subjected; but to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times'.[16] More than 20 representatives from the different tribes signed this memorandum. This move by the Naga Club, however, yielded no results. But it has to be noted that this was the first collective effort on the part of the leading individuals from the different tribes to spell out their view on the future status of the Naga people. It was 16 years after this move that the Naga Hills District Tribal Council was formed at the initiative of the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, C.R. Pawsey. This Council, with enlarged representatives from the tribal councils, emerged in 1946 as the NNC—the only organized political force in the Naga Hills which was clearly representative of the vast majority of the

Naga people. The NNC had 29 members representing the various tribes on the principle of proportional representation. Thus, for the first time in their history, the Naga people were coming under a single political organization. The formation of the NNC was decidedly a major step in the consolidation of the Naga nationalistic forces. With the Naga tribes growing ever more apprehensive of their fate in the event of the British leaving the subcontinent, the stage had actually been set for the emergence of the NNC, a large section of its leaders being drawn from the educated section of the Nagas.

One of the first acts of the NNC was to call upon the Nagas to prepare for self-determination and for acquiring fundamental rights. The secretary of the NNC, on 6 December 1946, declared in Kohima:

> the NNC stands for the unification of all the Naga tribes and their freedom ... Our country is connected with India, connected in many ways. We should continue that connection. I do not mind whether future India be a Congress government or a League government. But as a distinctive community, as I stated before, we must also develop according to our genius and taste. We shall enjoy home-rule in our country, but on broader issues be connected with India. We must fight for it, we must get it; keep on watching.[17]

The NNC leader here was voicing the Naga people's view regarding their future relationship with India. But it was not clear, as to what shape this relationship would take. From the above statement it appears that the NNC had not spelt out its demand for complete independence and would have settled for regional autonomy.[18]

But events were moving so fast in the subcontinent that the Naga leadership soon realized that if it did not spell out its demands in unequivocal terms, the Naga cause might be lost. Hence, the NNC made its demand clear for full independence. The INC had already come to know of this and, in a letter to the NNC leader, T. Sakhrie, Nehru wrote in August 1946:

> It is obvious that the Naga territory in Eastern Assam is much too small to stand by itself politically or economically. It lies between the two countries, India and China, and part of it consists of rather backward people who require considerable help. When India is independent, as it is bound to be soon, it will not be possible for the British Government to hold on to Naga territory or any part of it. They would be isolated between India and China. Inevitably, therefore, this Naga territory must

> be part of India and of Assam with which it has developed such close associations.[19]

India was yet to make its claim that the land of the Nagas formed an integral part of the country since time immemorial. Nehru was clearly stating that the 'Naga territory' was too small to exist as an independent nation and for strategic reasons it must join the Indian Union. The NNC, however, continued to stick to its demand for an independent Naga state, and an NNC delegation led by Angami Zapu Phizo[20] met Lord Mountbatten with the suggestion that the new Indian government should act as the guardian power for 10 years after which the Nagas would be free to determine their political future. This was followed by the presentation of the Ten Year Interim Government Scheme[21] to the Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Tribes which visited Kohima in May 1947. On the refusal of the Advisory Committee to make any suggestions to the Constituent Assembly on the question of the 10-year guardianship scheme, the NNC declared that, since the Nagas had their own constitution, the question of accepting any other constitutional arrangement did not arise. This deadlock was attempted to be broken by the Hydari Agreement[22] which acknowledged the NNC's right of control over all spheres of Naga life ranging from prevalent tribal laws to the ownership of land and taxation. But Article 8 of this Agreement[23] gave rise to another deadlock, with the NNC claiming that it ensured the Nagas' right to complete independence on the expiry of the 10-year period and the Indian side giving a totally different interpretation. Refusing to accept the Hydari Agreement, because it was rushed through without proper scope being given for discussion, some members of the NNC led by Phizo met Mahatma Gandhi in July 1947, and told him of the Nagas' determination to stay out of the Indian Union. Gandhi assured the delegation that in no circumstances would force be used against the Nagas who, according to him, were free to stay out of the Indian Union if they so desired.[24] Since nothing tangible emerged from the discussion with the Indian leaders, the NNC wrote to Nehru in November 1947, that if the Nagas were denied the freedom to chart out their own future, 'then the Naga people shall cease to be a part of the Indian Union from December 6, 1947'.[25]

This resulted in the hardening of attitudes on both sides and, when Phizo was elected President of the NNC in 1949, the Naga demand for independence gained further momentum. Under Phizo's leadership

the NNC was transformed into a militant-political organization, wedded to the idea of a sovereign Nagaland. The NNC rejected the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, held a successful plebiscite on the question of Naga independence (May to August 1951) and organized a total boycott of the General Elections of 1952. All this was followed by a civil disobedience movement resulting in the mass resignation of schoolteachers, boycott of all functions of Government of India, and refusal to pay taxes. Through these moves, each more successful than the other, the NNC proved beyond any shadow of doubt that it was the spokesman of all the Naga tribes and that the verdict of the Naga people was in favour of 'home rule'. Not being able to check the trend of events in the Naga Hills, the Government of India decided to crackdown on the NNC towards the middle of 1955. Police action against the NNC leadership and the search of important Naga villages, which followed Nehru's abortive visit to the Naga Hills, resulted in the eruption of armed hostilities. Thousands of young Nagas joined the Naga Home Guard and almost the entire NNC set-up went underground.[26] Thus, chances of negotiated settlement having receded, the formation of the Naga Federal Government was announced in March 1956. The Naga federal set-up was so thoroughly planned, having drawn its strength from the Naga village institutions, that within a relatively short period of time a parallel government started functioning.[27] In order to counter the growing strength of the NNC, New Delhi encouraged attempts by a section of the Naga elite, led by Imkongliba Ao, to bring the Naga Hills directly under the control of the Centre. Accordingly, the 'Naga Hills Tuensang Area', comprising the Naga Hills district of Assam and the Tuensang Division of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), was formed and placed under the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India. To the moderates, this was a great step forward for Naga nationalism and for the unity of the tribes. But the federal government opposed the move as a compromise, though there was some satisfaction over the fact that the new unit had been placed under the Ministry of External Affairs which, of course, carried obvious implications. New Delhi had succeeded in driving a wedge into the Naga Movement, and the next step towards finally winning over the moderates was the formation of the state of Nagaland in December 1963. The federal government strongly resisted this move and described it as a plan to set the Nagas against one another, and pledged to continue the

struggle. The events that followed are recent history and one need not go into them in detail. Yet, in order to have a better view of the rise of Naga nationalism and how it is being encountered by the Indian government, one must go into the nature of the Peace Agreement concluded between the Peace Mission and the federal government of Nagaland.[28] The Peace Mission appreciated 'the desire of the Nagas for self-determination' and their struggle for the preservation of their way of life. It also admitted that the Nagas never formed part of the Indian mainstream and that 'the Naga Federal Government could on their own, volition decide to be a participant in the Union of India'.[29] Jayaprakash Narayan, one of the members of the Peace Mission, declared:

> There can be no doubt that the struggle led by the NFG cannot be regarded as a mere "problem of law and order". It is most certainly a struggle for national freedom. It does not aim at overthrowing a government, but it certainly aims at throwing out a Government, namely, the Government of India, which it regards as established here by force ... the Naga people are unquestionably a nation. While there can be no doubt that the Naga problem is not a law and order question, but a question of freedom, for the Nagas, I have also tried to show that the Naga Freedom Movement may take a different character if it is placed in the context of a union of self-governing states.

The Peace Mission proposals could not bring about any solution to the Naga issue, because the federal government refused to make any concessions on the question of Naga sovereignty while the Indian government pressed for a solution within the framework of the Indian constitution. But the Peace Mission did acknowledge the fact that the Nagas constituted a separate nation and that any union of the Nagas with India had to be a voluntary one. Recognition of this fact has been consistently insisted upon by the Naga federal side in all its discussions with Delhi. The federal side has often said that Delhi has never attempted to view the issue from the Naga angle and has always tried to brush aside the growing tide of Naga nationalism as a secessionist move led by a group of armed rebels intent on capturing power. This allegation is not without basis and applies not only to the then and present Government of India but also to most of our political parties, including those on the Left, who seem to suffer from a certain lack of perspective in dealing with the Naga problem. Meaningful discussion of the Naga problem must keep in mind the fact that the movement is primarily one for self-

determination, and a peaceful political settlement of the issue can be achieved only when the Naga struggle is placed in its correct perspective. It will be useful perhaps if we try to understand the Naga pattern of tribal (village) democracy and how the NNC built its organization on the already existing sociopolitical set-up of the Naga people. In this context, it will be necessary to refer to the role of tribal councils, the nature of Naga nationalism and the question of full autonomy vis-à-vis the self-determination of the Naga people.

The Naga demand for self-determination has very often been wrongly linked up with Western education and ideas which came in the wake of successful Christian missionary activity in the Naga Hills. The idea of unconditional Westernization has never been accepted even by that small section of what may be called the 'educated middle class'. It is true that Christianity and Western education brought a section of Naga youth into contact with the liberal ideas of the West and, in the process, helped the growth of nationalistic forces by reducing to a great extent the rivalry among the various tribes. It is but natural that most of the leaders of the NNC belonged to this section. But, an important fact to be noted is that, in the process of the growth of Naga nationalism, no threat was posed to the traditional leadership of the tribal councils and the village headman continued to play as important a role as ever in Naga political life. This was partly due to the fact that the economic pattern of the people had not undergone any major changes during British rule, thus posing no serious threat to the authority of the tribal councils.[30] Another reason was the democratic pattern of self-government prevailing in the Naga village-states. Thus, instead of any clash between the 'nationalist elite' (however small this might have been) and the traditional chiefs and their councils, the Naga nationalists, received unstinted support from the Naga form of democracy based on the traditional tribal pattern. The NNC under Phizo's leadership took immense care to win over the tribal councils and chiefs to the cause of Naga independence.[31] Once this was achieved, the movement got a firm foundation. It took some time for the Government of India to realize that the main prop of the Naga Movement was the tribal council and that the only effective way of reducing their authority would be to reduce their influenceand that, for this, a break-up of the economic pattern of the Naga people, specifically of land-relationships, would be necessary. Even a rather cursory study of the role of the Indian Army

in Nagaland would reveal that, under cover of fighting the insurgents, the entire economic pattern of the Naga people has been attempted to be disrupted. In this connection one may refer to the village regroupings that were carried out.[32] This disruption of the economic pattern is bound to have far-reaching consequences and will in the long run shake the very basis of the Naga society—the village 'republics'.

One might argue that, like the countless other tribes of the subcontinent who, till the recent past, did not come within the mainstream of 'Indian nationalism', the Nagas too must adjust themselves to the post-1947 situation. But it must be kept in mind that, unlike many other tribes who have been swallowed up by the current of bourgeois nationalism, the Nagas, partly because of their geographical position, have succeeded in maintaining their separate identity based on a cultural and ethnic unity. This has been maintained in the midst of fierce intertribal rivalry, by the long tradition of tribal democracy. Thus, they view their struggle as one aimed at defending their way of life which they feel is being challenged by the Indian ruling classes. One does not assert that the Naga pattern of village democracy will not, or need not, undergo change. It will necessarily change along with the changes in the modes and relationships of production, but this will have to be the result of the working out of contradictions within Naga society although external influences may accelerate the process. The Nagas have been trying to build up a new and united Nagaland by reinvigorating their traditional political institutions which have been an important factor in crystallizing national consciousness. In order to disprove the Naga case for self-determination, it has often been asserted that the Nagas do not constitute a nation and that at best they may be called a 'sub-national' group. To begin with, it is stated that the Nagas are in no way distinguishable from their tribal neighbours and that they have never shared a common religion and culture. Hence, the conclusion is drawn that they do not possess one of the most essential requisites for qualifying as a nation, that is, a national consciousness. Nothing could be more untrue. One may quote the historian, E.A. Gait in this connection:

> The first thing that strikes an inquirer into the religious beliefs of the hill tribes of this frontier is the extraordinary uniformity of the principle which under-lines them all ... There can be no greater mistake than to assume that each tribe has its own individual beliefs, differing widely from those of others and circumscribed by the narrow tribal limits. The

> facts are quite the reverse and the religion of these tribes Shamanism, Animism, Not worship or whatever name may be applied to it is everywhere practically the same. There are differences of practice rather than of fundamental principles, and are far less, important than those which, divide the Saktas from the Vaishnavas, the Unitarians from the members of the Salvation army.[33]

If a deep attachment to one's native soil, to local traditions and to established territorial authority can be accepted as marks of nationalism, then the Nagas qualify on all counts. Moreover, apart from sharing a common economic pattern which is the basis of their long-cherished political and social institutions, the Nagas have evolved the necessary psychological structure on which a common Naga culture rests. It is this that clearly distinguishes them from their other tribal neighbours. The Nagas not possessing a common language has not been an insurmountable factor in the growth of nationalism,[34] because to common descent, a distinct territory, a common political and economic pattern of life, customs and traditions, the Nagas have learnt to add a corporate will so very essential to the growth of nationalism. The NNC must be given due credit for breaking the isolationism of the tribes and for instilling in the Naga masses the feeling that culturally, politically, and economically, their fate is linked up with the national body. The Nagas have often been accused of small nation narrow-mindedness. That their struggle has remained rather insular is true. But the Naga demand for self-determination should not be confused with small nation insularity and xenophobia. In discussing the Naga struggle it must be kept in mind that the Nagas were, on the whole, never drawn into anti-British struggle led by the Indian bourgeoisie. Nor have they shared a common tradition with the rest of the subcontinent. Although geographically a part of the Indian subcontinent, they have maintained their separate pattern of life. British occupation of the Naga Hills did not affect the changes which it did in other parts of the country. Hence, when the British left India, the overall Naga sentiment was that they be left alone. The NNC made capital out of this Naga feeling of apprehension and the Naga struggle began as a movement aimed at safeguarding the Naga way of life which, they felt, would be threatened in the case of Indian 'occupation'. Thus, the NNC has all along asserted that the union of the Nagas with India should be a voluntary one. In reply to the charges of secession, the NNC has consistently maintained that the question

of the Nagas seceding from the Indian Union does not arise because they never formed part of the Indian Union. In saying this, the Naga leaders realize that freedom to unite presupposes freedom to secede, and,'Without freedom to secede, unification cannot be called free'.[35] The point of voluntary union is illustrated by Lenin who, in referring to the secession of Norway from Sweden, wrote:

> The geographic, economic and language ties between Norway and Sweden are as intimate as those between the Great Russians and many other Slav nations. But the union between Norway and Sweden was not a voluntary one ... Norway was ceded to Sweden by the monarchs during the Napoleonic wars, against the will of the Norwegians: and the Swedes had to bring troops to Norway to subdue her.[36]

The Naga Federal side has been maintaining a similar stand saying that the British had no right to hand over the Nagas to the Indian government's jurisdiction and that the Nagas should have been given the choice to decide their future relationship with the Indian state. A question arises as to why the Nagas alone of all the tribes inhabiting the entire northeast region initially raised this demand. The answer, till recently, was attempted to be found in the spread of secessionist ideas by the foreign missionaries. But the case of Nagaland was different. Apart from the fact that the Nagas were under British rule for a relatively short period, it must be kept in mind that during British occupation Naga society remained more or less the same with the traditional land-relationships being left untouched. The Naga village, which was more tribal than feudal, continued its existence and the phenomenon of the market was absent; capitalist relations of production were not introduced and hence the village unit based on cooperation remained undisturbed. Apart from the Second World War, when a part of Nagaland including Kohima had a direct experience of the war, the Naga people have been virtually cut off from the rest of the subcontinent. The role played by the development of transport, particularly the railways, in fostering the growth of nationalism in the subcontinent is not applicable to Nagaland. Moreover, the role played by the middle class in helping the growth of the Naga national feeling, though important, was, not the motive force. Thus, it may be said that the bulwark of Naga nationalism has been the tribal way of life represented so well by the tribal councils and the chiefs of the various Naga tribes.

The Nagas have always fought to defend what they call 'the Naga way of life' and it is exactly on this feeling that the NNC built the bridges between the various tribes, thereby bringing them under the common banner of Naga nationalism. As far as the official NNC stand is concerned, it still sticks to its demand for an independent Nagaland. But circumstances and political exigency have compelled the NNC to think in lines of a peaceful solution to the Naga problem. With it has emerged the concept of an autonomous Nagaland within the Indian Union. The concept of regional and local autonomy seems to have attained greater significance in the light of recent developments in the Indian political scene and the call from the CPI(M), among others, for a national dialogue on Centre-state relations. Although the Desai–Phizo talks failed, the Naga underground has not given up its efforts to reach a peaceful settlement on lines of an autonomous Nagaland. It may be remembered that in the initial stages of the Naga Movement, the demand for secession from the Indian Union did not constitute the prime factor but was taken up later as the Government of India, not trying to understand the sentiment of the Nagas, launched a policy of suppression. It is necessary to bear in mind that true national equality, as Lenin argued, calls for 'wide regional autonomy and fully democratic self-government, with the boundaries of the self governing and autonomous regions determined by the local inhabitants on the basis of economic and social condition, national make-up of the people etc ...'[37]

Notes

1. The British had never exercised their jurisdiction over all the Naga tribes. Most of the northeastern Naga-inhabited areas were left completely untouched till 1947. For details see Yusoso Yuno, *The Rising Nagas* (New Delhi: Vivek Publishing House, 1974), pp. 106–8.

2. For population-wise break-up of the various tribes see *Techno-Economic Survey of Nagaland* (New Delhi: NCAER, 1968), p. 9.

3. Referring to this Neville Maxwell writes: 'Their [the Nagas'] social organization is tribal and they are sometimes thought of as a primitive people, even by the standards of the Indian subcontinent, but it is seriously to misrepresent them. By the standards of literacy, village self-government and democracy, and quick aptitude to the instruments and institutions of modernization, they are far from backward; their political leadership is mature and sophisticated, and their sense of national identity as strong as

that of any other people of the subcontinent, and stronger perhaps than most'. *India and the Nagas*, by Neville Maxwell, Minority Rights Group, Report No 17.

4. The present state of Nagaland covers an area of 16,488 sq km and lies between 256' and 27° 4' north of the Equator and between the longitudinal lines 93320' E and 95415' E. But this area, which forms the Nagaland constituted by the Government of India, is not acceptable to both the 'loyal' as well as the underground Nagas who are of the opinion that Nagaland should include the entire Naga-inhabited areas between the Chindwin and the Brahmaputra. This attitude was reflected in the reaction of both, the state government of Nagaland and the underground Nagas to the Indo–Burma Border Agreement (1975). Both sections felt that large chunks of Naga territory had been handed over to Burma. The population of Nagaland is approximately 5,16,000 but that of the entire Naga-inhabited area is around one million. Although the Naga tribes differ from one another, each possessing its own language unintelligible to the other, yet they share a common tradition and culture in the form of religious beliefs and social customs. (The present population of Nagaland is just over 19 lakhs.)

5. Although the Naga tribes differ from one another, each possessing its own language unintelligible to the other, yet they share a common tradition and culture in the form of religious beliefs and social customs.

6. Lakshmi Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations* (Gauhati: Assam Book Depot, 1968), p. 21.

7. *Techno- Economic Survey of Nagaland*, NCAER, New Delhi, 1968, p. 47.

8. Naga–Assamese trade flourished for centuries and Nagas bartered and sold commodities like salt, cotton, ivory, wax, and medicinal herbs to the Assamese who in turn supplied the Nagas with rice, clothes, etc. Evidence of this is seen in the wide use of patois Assamese in Nagaland, especially in areas bordering the plains of Assam. See Yusoso Yuno, *The Rising Nagas*, 1974, p. 62.

9. Elwin Verrier, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 162.

10. Ibid., p. 176.

11. Ibid.,Verrier, p. 176.

12. The Naga Hills district covered only central Nagaland and did not include the other Naga-inhabited areas under one administrative unit. Naga scholars of today blame the British for the deliberate division of their land into Naga Hills proper and parts of Assam, Manipur, and Burma. This step they feel, was aimed at keeping the Naga tribes divided and hence, to check

the growth of 'Nagaism' and Naga nationalism. 'Had the British visualized the foremost demand of all Nagas for integration into one unit and state, they would have received a lot of warm goodwill from the Nagas. Time and again, the British rule which created firm boundaries where previously there had been none, between India, China and Burma, cutting across the Nagas here and there against their will, had certainly laid the basis of future trend of Naga progress into conflict with the neighbours'. Yusoso Yuno, *The Rising Nagas*, 1974, p. 158.

13. Khonoma the birthplace of Phizo was the largest village state in the Naga Hills. Khonoma is also the birthplace of a very large number of Naga intellectuals, revolutionaries, and social reformers.

14. The Indian National Congress (INC) claimed that the Nagas were involved in the nationalist novement and to prove its case it cited the struggle of the Zeliangrong Nagas under their leader, Guidinliu. But Guidinliu's struggle was primarily confined to her tribe (which is made up of three subtribes—the Zemis, Liangmeis, and Rongmeis) and was based on intertribal rivalry, anti-Christianism, and the revival of animist rites. It was during the Japanese advance into Kohima during the Second World War that the Nagas felt some degree of oneness with the rest of the subcontinent. But even in the fight against the Japanese, as in the earlier anti-British uprisings, the Nagas fought for preserving their own identity.

15. The Naga Club, the first organization of its kind in the Naga Hills, was formed in 1918. It was the first effort at organized all-Naga opinion.

16. M. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland* (Kohima: Naga Institute of Culture, 1970), p. 164.

17. Yusoso Yuno, *The Rising Nagas*, 1974, p. 165.

18. Ibid., pp. 166–8.

19. Yuno, *The Rising Nagas*, p. 117.

20. Angami Zapo Phizo was born in 1900 in the village of Khonoma. He started his career as a businessman; served in the Indian National Army (INA) of Subhas Chandra Bose from 1943 to 1945; was in Central Jail, Rangoon, along with other INA prisoners after the British recaptured Burma. He returned to the Naga Hills in 1940 and joined the NNC; was elected President of the NNC in 1949 and has been its undisputed leader since then. He is in self-imposed exile in England since 1957.

21. The NNC, in its suggestion regarding a 10-year Interim government of the Naga People, laid down the following terms: (a) The interim government of the Naga people will be a government by the Naga people, having full powers vi respect of legislation, the executive and the judiciary; (b) Nagaland belongs to the Naga people and will be inalienable; (c) The

interim government of the Naga people will have full powers in the matter of revenue and expenditure, an annual subvention to cover the deficit being given by the Guardian Power; (d) For defence and for aiding civil power in case of emergency, a force considered necessary by the NNC will be maintained in Nagaland by the Guardian Power. The force will be responsible to the NNC who will in turn responsible to the Guardian Power.

22. Aram, M; *Peace in Nagaland*, pp. 82–3.

23. Article 8 of the Agreement was worded as follows: 'The Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Government of the Indian Union will have a special responsibility for a period of 10 years to ensure the due observance of the Agreement; at the end of this period, the Naga National Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of the Naga people be arrived at.

24. Yusoso Yuno,*The Rising Nagas*, 1974, p. 182.

25. Yuno, *The Rising Nagas*, p. 197.

26. The Naga Home Guard was raised by Phizo from among the Naga ex-servicemen and young recruits. It was the beginning of the Federal Naga Army (FNA). The Naga Youth Movement and the Naga Women's Society are the youth wings of the Naga National Council.

27. The federal government adopted a constitution which declared: 'Nagaland is a people's sovereign republic. This has been so from time immemorial. There shall be a parliament with a strength of 100 Tatars (members of the Tatar Hoho or House of Representatives). The President will be elected by the people and his cabinet will consist of fifteen Kilonsers (Ministers)'. While guaranteeing religious freedom and the equality of the sexes, the Federal Constitution further declared: 'Land belongs to the people and it will remain so. There will be no land tax, and other forms of taxation will be formulated by different administrative units.

28. The Peace Mission was formed in February 1964 with the then Assam Chief Minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Jayaprakash Narayan, and Michael Scott as members. For details of the Peace Mission proposals see, Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, pp. 208–12.

29. M. Aram, *Peace in Nagaland*, p. 38.

30 The self-sufficient village unit had continued through the ages and, except for the Angamis who had taken to terraced cultivation ownership of land was generally communal although individual families possessed small private plots. This varied from tribe to tribe but the general pattern has been the same still today. 'There are basically two types of land ownership systems. In one, practically all land is owned by the chief and the people

cultivate it. The arrangement is not dissimilar to early forms of feudalism. In the second, land is owned by individual families and there is considerable variation in the size of family holdings within the village ... Ownership of land provides basis for social stratification. But it is not employed either as a means for widening wealth inequality or as a lever for social mobility. One of the reasons for this is the accepted method of joint cultivation of jhums. Where terraced cultivation is dominant as among the Angamis there is relatively greater individualization of agriculture and wealth distribution based on it'. [*Techno-Economic Survey of Nagaland* (New Delhi: NCAER, 1968), pp. 14–15]. Thus, although the pattern of land ownership is varied land values or paid rents were not generally determined by market forces.

31. The tribal council, composed of the elders of the village, had both judicial and executive powers. The character and composition of the councils varied from tribe to tribe but in each case they formed the machinery of self-government. Whereas in other parts of the country the authority of such tribal councils has been gradually undermined, in Assam such an authority was augmented by the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation Act of 1945. The British appointed *'gaonburas'* (village headmen) to act as liaison between the government and the councils. With most Naga tribes, the post held by the chief is not hereditary but elective. There are necessarily variations from tribe to tribe with the Aos having a 'republican' form of self-government led by a council of elected headmen called *'Tatars'*. Only the Sema and Konyak tribes have hereditary kingship but this too is of a limited form.

32. Regrouping has resulted in people from different villages being grouped together, stockaded, and isolated from their fields. This was done to prevent the villagers from helping the 'hostiles' with food, shelter, and other necessities. Such regrouping has resulted in untold suffering and most important of all, has destroyed the village unit that is so very central to Naga tribal life. For details, see P.D. Stracey, *Nagaland Nightmare* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1968), pp. 164–6.

33. E.A. Gait, *Census of India,* Vol. I, (Assam, 1891; Shillong, 1892), p. 93,

34. While the official language is English, Nagamese continues to be the link language between the tribes.

34. Lenin as quoted by George Thomson in *From Marx to MaoTse-Tung,* (London, 1971), p. 59.

35. Lenin, *'Selected Works'*, Vol. I (New Delhi: Progress Publishers, 1970), p. 623.

36. Thomson, *From Marx to Mao Tse-Tung,* p. 64.

37. Thomson, *From Marx to Mao Tse-Tung,* p. 64.

III Naga Nationalism and the Role of the Middle Class*

I

This paper attempts to present certain formulations regarding the growth of the middle class in the twentieth century Naga society and its role in the development of Naga nationalism. The first part of the paper deals with the origins and growth of nationalistic ideas among the Naga tribes since the beginning of this century till the 1950s; the second part attempts to conceptualize the middle class in the Naga context and to trace its origins, growth, and role in fostering the development of Naga nationalism.

The British occupation of the Naga Hills was the results of successive victories over the various Naga Tribes. Without going into the details of the British–Naga encounter in the nineteenth century, one can observe that in course of their engagements with the various Naga tribes the British generally never met with the combined resistance of two or more tribes. Each tribe put up its own resistance and the final battle was fought in the years 1879–80[1] when 13 Angami 'village-states' laid a siege on Kohima which lasted for 11 days. The Battle of Khonoma, as it is popularly known, was the last major encounter that the British had with a Naga tribe. This was followed by the speedy consolidation of British power in a large area of the Naga Hills.[2] The British had not been too eager to extend their sway over the Naga territory and this had resulted in several exchanges between the senior government officials. That senior British administrators were reluctant to extend the borders of the Raj into the Naga Hills can be seen, from Lord Dalhousie's Minute wherein it is stated:

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> I dissent entirely from the policy which is recommended of what is called obtaining control, that is to say of taking possession of these hills, and of establishing sovereignty over their savage inhabitants. Our possession could bring no profit to us as it would be unproductive. As it is impolitic to contemplate permanent possession of these hills, so it seems to be impolitic to sanction temporary possession of them.[3]

This viewpoint continued to hold sway till the 1860s when Cecil Beadon took over as the Lieutenant Governor and the British started to devise means of bringing the Naga tribes under their control in order to finally put an end to the incursions and raids on the adjoining plains of Assam. In 1874, Captain Johnstone informed the Chief Commissioner that he had 'formally taken under (our) protection on payment of revenue two Naga villages which were in immediate danger of attack, and had ordered the other hostile villages to leave them alone'.[4] Although the Chief Commissioner agreed with Captain Johnstone's move, the highest authorities clearly disapproved of this step because they considered that 'it may involve us (the British) in the reduction of the country by degrees to a regular system of government regardless of expenses'.[5]

The Britishers have been much praised for bringing a peace and tranquility into the Naga Hills which the Naga tribes had never enjoyed before. While it is true that the British occupation of the Naga Hills brought with it a sense of security and order concomitant with British administration, it would be wrong to presume that the British brought the different tribes closer together. It should be kept in mind that the British occupation of the Naga Hills was primarily motivated by the need to keep off raids on the plains areas and therefore they were intent on administering the hills with as limited a budget as possible. Hence, the Frontier Tracts Regulation II of 1880 provided for the basis by which the Nagas would be able to govern themselves according to their well worked-out pattern of tribal laws and customs.

It is obvious that the British policy of non-interference in the tribal pattern of village democracy was the results of political expediency and not necessarily out of concern to safeguard the tribal people from the 'unscrupulous traders' from the plains. Had the latter been the case and had the British worked out an overall policy affecting the various tribes of the subcontinent then the fate of the tribals of Chota Nagpur, for example, would not have been what it is today. Therefore, although in the course of the military occupation of the Naga Hills, the Britishers

extended a rather loose sort of political administration in those areas which came under their sway, they were quite content in leaving the tribes in their primitive isolation. That the British administration did not interest itself with the economic progress of the area can be seen from the fact that it did not consider it profitable to develop the transport and communication network in the hills except when such was strictly necessary for movement of troops, and so on. Referring to the British attitude, a present-day Naga intellectual has this to say:

> The British Government were contented so long as the tribesmen remained in isolation conducting their own affairs according to their own law and customs, it presented no problems except that required to prevent raid or other forms of aggression on more civilised or less warlike neighbours. For this purpose a military occupation of territory was necessary and a loose system of political control or administration of some sort which did not involve more than a minimum interference with tribal customs and the expense on which if greater as it normally was than any revenue yielded by such an area was in the nature of an insurance ... while they took great pains to preserve them (tribal manners and customs) to the utmost limit possible and to ensure that such change as would inevitable come should not be destructive in its suddenness, they failed to appreciate the economic requirements of the hill people and neglected them.[6]

British occupation did not bring with it any direct economic benefits to the inhabitants of the Naga Hills who, on the whole, continued to live their lives in tribal isolation. Life for the average Naga villager continued to be the same under the British except for the fact that intertribal warfare and practices like headhunting declined because of the British presence. Otherwise, with the pattern of land ownership and the methods of cultivation remaining the same, one could not expect any noticeable change in the traditional life-pattern of the Naga tribes. But, along with British occupation came the introduction of currency education on Western lines and, above all, Christianity which seemed to challenge the very roots of tribalism. While the introduction of currency gave birth to a money-economy, on a very limited scale, which affected the social life of the tribes,[7] Christianity and Western education brought in new values based on individualism which posed a direct challenge to the collective life-pattern of the people. The introduction of currency and the development of a money-economy 'afforded opportunities to indi-

vidual to amass personal fortunes and for a few to collect to their hands the means of production formerly distributed between many, and the persons who succeeded were often those with no hereditary responsibility for the welfare of their kinsmen and fellow villagers'.[8] This cannot be said to be a trend affecting the general pattern of Naga life and it is debatable as to how far the introduction of money-economy weakened the communal ownership of land,[9] but it is certain that the introduction of money-economy was one of the causes behind the formation of the middle class in Nagaland.

Much has already been written about the impact of Christianity and modern education on Western lines on the Naga people. Christian missionary activities primarily led by the Baptist Church were inextricably linked with the spread of Western education in the Naga Hills. Therefore, in the early periods of missionary activity it was difficult to delink the two. Western education and the liberal ideas it carried with it has been responsible to a very great extent in moulding the national consciousness of the twentieth-century Naga, and this has wrongly given rise to the feeling that since the foreign missionaries were the pioneers in the field of education, they must have been responsible for the spread of 'secessionist' ideas amongst the Nagas. I come to that later. But now I would like to discuss a point or two connected with the influence of Christianity on the Naga tribes and how this tended to weaken the traditional community life of the tribal by questioning some of their age-old beliefs, social practices, and customs.

While the British administrators took care not to interfere with the customs and beliefs of the tribes and acknowledged the right of the tribal councils to deal with Naga affairs, the Christian missionaries, on the other hand, attempted just the opposite. Commenting on this aspect of Christian proselytization, Alemchiba has this to say:

> As religion played a strong part in every Naga ceremony and as that religion was not Christianity they (the Christian missionaries) felt that every ceremony should be abolished. Such ceremonies as the great Feasts of Merit, at which the religious aspect was far less important than the social, had not been re-modelled on Christian lines but had been utterly abolished among the converts. The tendency was to abolish abruptly the old thing and substitute individualism for a strong community feeling which had enabled the tribes to survive for so long. Not only was the individualism wrapped up with strong emphasis on personal salvation, it

> induced a direct and natural reaction against all old things that mattered in village life and the social genius of the tribe. The result was a conflict not necessarily of arms but of culture, a conflict between the interest of the community and the individual which caused cultural tension in society.[10]

I have quoted at length from the views of a modern Naga intellectual, Alemchiba, because of late there has been an increasing awareness about the effects of Christian proselytization among the Naga tribes. Of late there has also grown a movement for a return to traditional ceremonies like the great Feasts of Merit and so on, without of course violating the basic tenets of Christianity. The missionary onslaught on the Murungs and the Feast of Merit has been widely commented upon by Fürer-Haimendorf who says:

> It is a pity that the American Baptist Mission had little sympathy with the aims of the Government and even less appreciation of the valuable elements of Naga culture. Many of its aspects conflict in no way with the principles of Christianity, and I believe that even some of the old feasts and ceremonies ... certainly agricultural festivals ... could have been adapted to the now faith, given a new meaning and retained by Christian communities.[11]

Without going into the merits or demerits of the missionary assault on the traditional practices of the tribes, one may conclude that Christianity and the Western education it brought with it, which combined Christian ideas of universal love with the political and social beliefs of Western liberalism, no doubt helped the individual to overcome the negative aspects of tribal isolationism, thereby helping him to see across his tribe boundaries. This contributed in no small manner to the emergence of the middle class in Naga life. But it would perhaps be a rather hasty generalization if we say that the Christian assault on the rites of the 'heathens' resulted in the substitution of community feeling with individualism. For, even the most educated Naga retained his link with his village where he was guided by the traditional relationships of village tribal life.

Moreover, another aspect which perhaps needs to be considered is that the practice of animist rites had given the Nagas a degree of freedom which naturally stood in the way of the success of institutionalized religions. The influence of the church in Naga politics has often been

rather exaggerated and a study of the Church's role vis-à-vis the Naga underground movement reveals that its influence has gradually been on the wane.[12] Yet, in conclusion, it must be said that the Church by making free education readily accessible to the average Naga wrought tremendous change in the social fabric of the Naga tribes. Whereas in most of the other parts of British India the fruits of modern education were enjoyed by that class which grew out of the landed aristocracy or from commercial activity, in Nagaland education imparted by the Church was not confined to any particular section of the population. Those tribes like the Aos naturally reaped greater advantages from missionary education because they were amongst the first to come into contact with the missionaries, but as Christian proselytization progressed, most of the other tribes also came to feel the effects of modern education. While in other parts of the country the benefits of Western education generally went to the affluent classes, in Nagaland the spread of Christianity and the modern education that attended it was viewed with suspicion and distrust by the village chiefs and elders.[13] Therefore, the spread of Western education and modernism amongst the Nagas was not confined to any particular section of the people and the educated group of Nagas that emerged was representative of a cross-section of the Naga tribes.[14] This may pose interesting questions relating to the rise of the middle class in Naga life and whether this class was, as in the case of the neighbouring Assam valley, born out of the feudal classes. For that we would have to deal with the land pattern and land ownership in Naga society, a point which I have tried to touch in the concluding part of this paper. To come back to the Church's role and the spread of education, one may conclude that while Christianity and Western education were two of the most important factors in the emergence of the middle class by helping the Naga to see across his tribe boundaries and develop an all-Naga consciousness, the growth of nationalistic forces in Nagaland was not necessarily at the cost of the average Naga's attachment to his tribe which still remains to be an important factor. On the other hand there exists a strong point of view which tends to assert that tribalism has been one of the important factors contributing to the setbacks that the Naga struggle has received.[15] We shall have occasion to refer to that later. But, for the time being let us attempt to trace the growth of nationalistic organizations in the Naga hills during the first decades of this century and what role was played in this by that

section of the Nagas which had been exposed to Western education and Christianity.

The Naga Club, the first attempt at organized political opinion amongst the Nagas in the twentieth century, was formed in 1918 with representatives from several Naga tribes. Although not much is known about the activities of the Naga Club, it is known for the memorandum it submitted to the Simon Commission in 1929,[16] wherein it demanded that the Nagas be excluded from the scope of the proposed constitutional changes and instead be kept under the direct administration of the British. More than 20 representatives of the different tribes signed the memorandum. The Naga Club consisted mainly of government officials and a few leading headmen of the neighbouring villages who used to come in for meetings at which social and administrative problems were discussed. The club ran a cooperative store in Mokokchung, one of the first to be opened in the district but could not make much headway due to various factors.[17] The memorandum presented by the club to the Simon Commission makes interesting reading in that it combines an awareness of democratic rights with the demand to be left alone to develop along tribal lines. The memorandum states that,'we (the Naga) had no chance or opportunity to improve in education though we can boast of two or three graduates of an Indian University in our country, we have not got one yet who is able to represent all our different tribes or master our languages much less one to represent us in any council or province'.[18] The memorandum concludes with an appeal to the British government to safeguard the customary rights of the Nagas which, the club felt, would be threatened if the Naga Hills were to be included within the Reformed Scheme. The continued reference on the part of the Naga Club to the non-availability of any individual or individuals to represent all the tribes makes it clear that till the 1920s the Naga tribes were living in relative isolation, there being no single leader or group of leaders capable of representing all the tribes. It appears that the process of break-up of tribal society which had started in the Naga Hills before British occupation was checked by the new rulers and thereby the emergence of a single ruler or an aristocracy of chiefs was prevented. Referring to the break-up of tribal society through inter-tribe warfare, George Thomson writes:

> The break-up of tribal society was precipitated by warfare. Increase of population gave rise to inter tribal disputes and these in turn to maraud-

ing raids conducted by one of the chiefs with a band of volunteers ... In the course of time contending tribes and tribal leagues merged into kingdoms controlled by an aristocracy of chiefs, under a single supreme ruler. His residence became the administrative centre. At the same time, the old tribal relations based on kinship, reckoned through the mother were being undermined. The new unit superseding the clan was the patriarchal family. This was closely identified with the holding of land, which together with all other rights of property was hereditary in the male line.[19]

Can we therefore, presume that in the Naga Hills, the process towards the emergence of an aristocracy of chiefs under a single ruler which had started with the inter-tribe warfare was checked by the imposition of British military and political control over the Nagas? Whatever is the case, in the 1920s the various Naga tribes could not point out to any one individual or group of chiefs who could represent them. It was therefore natural that the leadership which the Naga Club was made up of educated Naga youth and government officials, although it would perhaps be wrong to presume that chiefs which the club claimed to represent had no say at all. Given the nature of the Naga society, the chiefs must have actively participated in the deliberations of the club although the sophistication of the memorandum might have been missed by many. Accustomed as they were to a life of fierce independence, the chieftains were naturally apprehensive of any moves initiated by foreigners, and in mobilizing the opinion of chiefs the small section of educated Nagas which formed the core of the emerging middle class had taken the initiative. There are no records of the activities of the Naga Club after this, although we know that the Naga Club was followed by a Lotha Council in 1923 and an Ao Tribal Council in 1928. All these set the stage for the emergence of the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (NHDTC) in 1945.

The NHDTC was formed at the initiative of Mr C.R. Pawsey, the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills. It was the first attempt to form an organization which would represent all the tribes. But the NHDTC did not last long perhaps because it was not found to be duly representative of the tribes and it goes to the credit of the Naga people that Pawsey's effort was not blindly followed. It just paved the way to a conference of all the representative of individual tribal councils which was held in February 1946. It was at this conference that the NNC was formed.[20] It is to be noted that term 'national' was used for the first

time and the NNC was composed of 29 members who represented the various tribes on the basis of proportional representation. In fact, every Naga was supposed to be a member of the NNC. Its original aim was to foster the welfare and social aspiration of the Nagas and it was not a political organization in the sense that it had no paying membership and no pledge of loyalty to the party. As the activities of the NNC widened, it became the sole organized political force in the Naga Hills. Thus, for the first time in their history, the Naga tribes were coming together under a single political organization. The formation of the NNC was decidedly a major step in the consolidation of the Naga nationalistic forces. A large section of the leadership of the NNC was naturally drawn from the educated section of Nagas or what may be called the emerging Naga middle class.[21] Without going into the controversy of the political role of the NNC vis-à-vis the Naga demand for independence, a subject beyond the scope of this paper, it must be said that it was the NNC under the leadership of men like Phizo and Imkongmeren Ao, which laid the foundation of Naga nationalism. The movement led by the NNC, which was originally a movement aimed at achieving the solidarity of the Naga tribes, contributed immensely towards the lessening of intertribal rivalry and the emergence of an all-Naga consciousness which is today loosely defined as 'the Naga way of life'. It was the NNC which, through its social and political demands and its method of organization, paved the way for the emergence of the modern Naga nation. Prior to this, most of the tribes lived in isolation and the role of the tribal council was limited to the 'village republics'. Under the banner of the NNC the tribal councils came together, thereby laying the foundation of an all-Naga representative organization.

As stated earlier, a large section of the leadership of the NNC was drawn from the newly emerging middle class. But it is interesting to note that the NNC did not develop into a typical middle-class organization aimed at safeguarding middle class rights. It is important to note that in the process of the growth of Naga nationalism, no threat was posed to the traditional leadership of the tribal councils and the village headmen continued to play as effective a role as ever in Naga life. This was of course partly due to the economic pattern of the people which had not undergone any major changes during British rule, thus posing no serious threat to the authority of the tribal councils. The NNC took immense care to win over the tribal councils and the chiefs to the cause

of Naga independence.[22] Moreover the entire organizational pattern of the NNC was based on the traditional tribal pattern. Thus, instead of any clash occurring between the emerging middle-class leadership of the NNC and the traditional chiefs and their councils, the Naga nationalists led by the NNC received unstinted support from the latter.

It is not uncommon that in the course of the growth of nationalistic forces in a tribal society, the small middle-class leadership faces severe opposition from the tribal chieftains whose authority is very often derived from intertribal rivalry.[23] But in Nagaland, the character of the middle class (which was not born either out of the landed aristocracy or was the result of commercial activity) as well as the traditional pattern of village democracy contributed to the success of the NNC. That the NNC was highly successful in acquiring the support and cooperation of the village chiefs and councils, was amply demonstrated during the plebiscite of 1951 (May–August) and the boycott of the general elections in 1952.[24] In both cases the overwhelming majority of the Naga people sided with the NNC. Without the support of the tribal councils and the chiefs this just could not have been possible. The civil disobedience movement launched by the NNC after the poll boycott was also an almost total success primarily because of the support it got from the tribal councils, the chiefs as well as from the *'gaonburas'*.

From all this, we may conclude that in the early phases of the movement led by the NNC the motive force behind it was the tribal councils without whose cooperation the NNC could not have achieved even a small percentage of success. Once the Government of India realized that the NNC movement was not led by just a small educated middle class but was in fact backed actively by the tribal councils, it decided that the only effective means was to breakup the economic pattern of life of the Naga people, of which the village was the primary unit. Hence, the notorious village regrouping followed.[25] These regroupings had a much more far-reaching aim than that of flashing out the rebel elements. Therefore, we see that although the leadership of the NNC was to a great extent made up of the emerging middle class, the organization itself chiefly drew its strength from the tribal councils and the people.

If one goes through the various documents relating to the NNC demands, programmes, etc., it becomes evident that the Naga state, that the NNC stands for, would be based on the traditional political institutions of the Naga people which, of course, would be reinvigo-

rated. The bulwark of Naga nationalism under the NNC's leadership seems to have been the tribal way of life represented by the pattern of village democracy. The Naga have, in the past, always fought to defend their 'village republics' from attacks by other tribes and foreigners. Today, this seems to have been replaced by what is termed as 'the Naga way of life', and it is exactly on this feeling that the NNC attempted to build bridges between the various tribes, thereby bringing them under the common banner of Naga nationalism.

Over the years the NNC leadership must have learnt that although the protracted struggle of the Nagas against a powerful adversary has given the Nagas a corporate will and consciousness which form the basis of Naga nationalism, yet the economic changes that Nagaland is undergoing since it achieved statehood within the Indian Union, the alignments and realignments of political forces that have been taking place and the rise of a small but powerful middle class led by the bureaucracy are, but a few factors which have led to the lessening of the appeal of a tribal utopia held up by leaders like Phizo.[26] It remains to be seen how the NNC will adapt itself to the changing circumstances. The re-emergence of the NNC after all these years of underground existence, the growth of an affluent middle class in the Naga society of today, the role of the various 'constitutional' parties, all need separate treatment well beyond the scope of this paper.

II

This part of the paper attempts at conceptualizing the middle class in the Naga context and to trace its origins and growth. The attempts at defining the middle class in Indian politics have often led to diverse and contradictory viewpoints. As such, it is but natural that in trying to trace the origin and growth of such a class in tribal society, one is bound to encounter diverse problems. The absence of caste as a factor in Naga social life, the relative unimportance of land as a lever to social and political power, and the more or less egalitarian build-up of Naga tribal society are but a few points which tend to make the issue complicated. We have to keep all these in mind when trying to work out the class orientation in a tribal society like that of the Nagas which came under a colonial economy. In the preceding part of this paper I have

already referred to the possible check that British rule might have given to the emergence of feudal relationship of production by imposing a political and military authority which put an end to intertribal warfare, thereby preventing the rise of a single tribe under a single ruler into a predominant position. The break-up of tribal society and the development of feudal relationships of production was arrested by British rule and hence the middle class that finally emerged in Naga social life had its roots neither in the landed aristocracy as common in other parts of the subcontinent, nor did it evolve through commercial development. The growth of this class in Nagaland was inextricably linked with the spread of Western education, primarily at the initiative of the Christian missionaries, and the rise of the professions ranging from teaching to law and medicine. This class is obviously a product of adaptive socio-economic change and is made up of 'small entrepreneurs, small rentiers, small and middle level technicians, salaried bureaucracy of various species, middle level professional groups, etc.'[27] Since the effects of Christianity and the spread of Western education on the social life of the Nagas have been widely commented upon by numerous authors and researchers, I should like to deal in brief with the land ownership pattern amongst the Naga tribes and its possible impact on the emergence of the middle class in Naga life.

As we are well aware of, the Naga tribes have basically two types of land ownership systems related to the two methods of cultivation. Amongst the tribes practising jhum cultivation land was collectively owned, with the chief being often vested with the legal ownership of the land as in the case of the Semas.[28] In most cases the authority of the chief was more of a symbolic nature, the villagers as a whole exercising ownership over the land. But among the Angamis, who practice terrace cultivation, land is owned by individual families and there is considerable variation in the size of the family holdings within the village.[29] Referring to this A.K. Burmon writes:

> There are two main types of property right in land which are in existence in this area associated with the two different forms of cultivation. Taking exceptions into consideration it is noteworthy that areas with shifting or jhum cultivation have not seen the natural growth of private property in land, whereas in areas where terrace cultivation is predominant, there is a tendency for the growth of private property in land.[30]

It was amongst the Angamis that the property right was the strongest and they also carried on an active slave trade.[31] It is obvious that the more advanced method of cultivation of the Angamis put them ahead of the other tribes and the area in and around Khonoma was agriculturally the most developed one in the beginning of the century. Moreover the Angamis also seem to have possessed the most organized village set-up and succeeded in putting up the longest and best organized resistance to the British. Khonoma village itself became the symbol of Naga resistance to British. And, not surprisingly, it is from this very Khonoma village that a great number of middle-class leaders ranging from Phizo to Vizol have emerged. Yet, it was not the Angamis but the Aos who as a tribe came to exercise greater influence in the sociopolitical life of the Nagas as a whole in the first decade of this century. This can be linked with the fact that it was the Aos who were first among the tribes to be exposed to Christianity and Western education of which they made the most. This naturally leads us to the question as to why the Angamis, despite their more advanced means of cultivation, could not come to play as dominant a role as that of the Aos under the British. This in turn leads us to the question as to how far the ownership of land was linked with the growth of the middle class in Nagaland.

The system of land settlements introduced by the British did not cover the Naga Hills and the tribal pattern of land ownership continued. The villages were more or less self-sufficient and the right over the land was either symbolically vested in the chief or it was owned collectively by the village council. Even where there was individual ownership of land, the general tendency of property right in land was still at a formative stage. Land was still not a commodity in the sense that there is full free ownership with the right to sell it or pledge it. The purchase and sale of cultivable land is yet to become common practice in Nagaland. Therefore, 'although there is a tendency to secure land as private property the process is yet in its very initial stages and has not yet broken up the community character of possession of land in the hills'.[32] This at least partly explains why a landed aristocracy did not emerge in Nagaland, even among tribes like the Angamis. But we cannot assume that the process of individual ownership of land which had gained ground among the Angamis would have, in the long run, accelerated the growth of feudal relationship of production had this not

been checked by the imposition of British rule which virtually brought about a status quo in inter-tribe relationships. Moreover, it was through government regulation that the right of the tribal councils over village land were finally protected (for example Inner Line Regulation of 1873) and acts like the Naga Jhum Land Regulation of 1946 gave the inhabitants absolute rights over their jhum lands and recognized their right to practice shifting, cultivation, as well as to collect forest products from the jhum lands for domestic use though not for sale. Therefore there were natural, sociocultural, and governmental restrictions to the free sale and purchase of land in Nagaland and all this, along with extremely slow growth of a money-economy, contributed to the halt in the process of transition of communal ownership of land to private ownership. This partly explains why the ownership of land did not act as important factor in the emergence of the middle class in a society where such ownership was not regarded as a determining factor of the quality of social honour because the permanent ownership of land did not hold much significance in a community which practised shifting cultivation; moreover, even in cases where individual ownership had developed, land was yet to assume a commodity character.

Therefore, in conclusion, we may say that the emergence of the middle class in Nagaland is directly linked with the spread of Western education under the British and the attendant growth of a salaried bureaucracy as well as that of the various professions. After 1947 with the intensification of the Naga struggle, the small middle class came to play an important role, and as Nagaland moved towards statehood within the Indian Union and the Nagas were faced with the responsibility of governing their State, there was a sharp rise in the growth rate of this class which today is primarily made up of the salaried bureaucracy, businessmen ranging from affluent government contractors to petty shopkeepers, men belonging to various professions such as medicine and teaching as well as owners of urban property in the form of houses let out to tenants. Amongst these sections it is perhaps the bureaucracy that is the most important. Although most of the ministers and government officials still retain their link with land, absentee landlordism seems to be creeping in. With the huge amounts of money being pumped into Nagaland since the 1950s, it is but natural that far-reaching changes in the Naga society are under way.

Notes

1 The siege of Kohima was the culminating point in a six-month-old uprising of the Angamis. The uprising was the most elaborate and well organized one that the British had to face during their thrust into the Naga Hills. All the Angami villages in and around the area joined in the uprising. It is said that the warriors had acquired more than 500 guns for the final assault.

2 The British had never exercised their jurisdiction over all the Naga tribes. Most of the north-eastern Naga inhabited areas were left almost untouched till 1947. For details see: Yusoso Yuno, *The Rising Nagas* (New Delhi: Vivek Publishing House,1974), pp. 105–06.

3 Verrier Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 162.

4 *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 176.

5 *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 176.

6 K. Suresh Singh (ed.), *Tribal Situation in India*,(Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), p. 479.

7 S.K. Barpujari, 'Changes in Naga Hills in the 19th Century', working paper for UGC Seminar on 'Society in N.E. India' organised by Dibrugarh University in March, 1978.

8 Suresh Singh, K.,*Tribal Situation in India,* op. cit., pp. 478–79.

9 S.K. Barpujari, 1978.

10 Singh, *Tribal Situation in India,*1972, pp. 479–80.

11 Von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas* (Calcutta: Thacker Spink & Co, 1978), p. 57.

12 By way of example, one may refer to the declining influence of the Nagaland Peace Council (NPC), an organization dominated by the Church. In the recent Naga Public Conference, convened by the NPC, most of the delegates walked out in protest when the demand for a resolution seeking negotiations between the Government of India and the NNC was turned down by the Chairman, Rev. Longri Ao. (*Ura Mail,* Dimapur, 24 May 1978). The diminishing role of the church can also be seen in the China policy of the NNC leadership under men like Muivah Thangkhul.

13 Singh, *Tribal Situation in India*, 1972, p. 295.

14 The spread of Christianity in Nagaland was not confined primarily to the downtrodden cases as was the case in other parts of India. Here because of the egalitarian nature of the tribal society, when conversion took place the entire population of a village was covered.

15 In the three-day conference of the NNC held at Khonoma village in May 1978, about 2,300 delegates representing 17 tribes attended. Mr

Khutovi Sema, a senior leader of the NNC in the course of his speech said that, 'tribalism had wrought havoc to the people and had ultimately sapped the strength of the NNC'. See *Ura Mail*, Dimapur, 17 May 1978.

16 For details about the memorandum see, Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland* (Kohima, 1970), pp. 163–5.

17 Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, p. 163.

18 *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, pp. 163–4.

19 George Thomson, *Capitalism and After* (London: China Policy Study Group, 1976), pp. 48–9.

20 *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, p. 165.

21 By way of example we may refer to Mr A.Z. Phizo and Mr Imkongmeren Ao, the President and Vice President of the NNC respectively since 1949. Both have been exposed to Western education and Christianity. Whereas Phizo began his career as an agent of an insurance company and had also indulged in petty business, Imkongmeren was the son of a *'dubasi'* and was strongly influenced by the Church. For biographical sketch of Imkongmeren Ao, see, Udayon Misra,'Portrait of a Naga Hostile', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XII, No. 20, 14 May 1977.

22 The tribal council composed of the elders of the village, had broad judicial and executive powers. The character and composition of the council varied from tribe to tribe but in each case they formed the machinery of self-government. Refer note on tribal council in 'Naga National Question' by Udayon Misra in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIII, No. 14, 8 April 1978.

23 Refer to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth* (New Delhi: Penguin 1969), pp. 87–9.

24 Refer to Udayon Misra, 'The Naga Struggle III', Vol. 7, No. 41, in *Frontier*, 1 February 1975.

25 Regrouping has resulted in people from different villages being grouped together, stockaded, and isolated from their fields. This was done to prevent the villagers from helping the hostiles with food, shelter, and other necessities. Such regrouping has resulted in untold suffering and, most important of all, had tended to destroy the village unit that is so very central to Naga tribal life. For details see P.D. Stracey, *Nagaland Nightmare* (Bombay: Allied, 1968), pp. 164–8.

26 Refer conclusion of 'The Naga Struggle III', Vol. 7, No. 42, of *Frontier*, 8 February 1975.

K.S. Krishnaswamy et al., (eds), *Society and Change* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 25.

27 Amongst the Semas the land belongs symbolically to the chief who distributes it among the villagers on a tenure of cultivation which is for

one year. The cultivators have no legal right over the land they cultivate. For details see *Gazetteer of Nagaland, Government of Nagaland, Kohima, 1970.*

28 Yusoso Yono, *The Rising Nagas*, p. 14

29 Abani K. Burmon, 'Tribal Agriculture in the North East Hill Region', in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 63, October 1972.

30 J.K. Hutton, *The Angami Naga* (Calcutta: OUP, 1969), p. 154.

31 Abani K. Burmon, October 1972.

IV Portrait of a Naga 'Hostile'*

When I first met Imkongmeren Ao in prison in September 1975, I was slightly taken aback. From what I had read about the Naga struggle and from the photographs of Imkongmeren I had seen, I expected to meet a fiery and determined leader of the Naga underground. Instead, the 'hostile' that I was introduced to seemed a meek and frail old man, well above 70. He was busy cleaning a patch in front of his ward with a broom. However, my initial disappointment did not last long for I soon realized that Imkongmeren is made of stuff that people's heroes are made.

The first thing that struck me about Imkongmeren was his disarming humility. He seemed to be quite at home in his prison surroundings, determined to make the best of his period in detention. For a man of his age, Imkongmeren was bearing his incarceration with stoic calm. Housed in a barrack with about 50 of his younger compatriots (Naga young men captured on their way to China during the Christmas of 1974), Imkongmeren commanded immense respect and admiration from all sections of prisoners and was commonly addressed as 'uncle'. Despite his advanced age, he believed in doing things for himself and depended on his younger colleagues only when it became absolutely necessary.

* The author of this article was a MISA detenu in Assam's Nowgong Special Jail where over a hundred Naga 'hostiles' including Imkongmeren Ao are being kept. First published in *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. XII, No. 20, 14 May 1977.

Imkongmeren Ao is perhaps little known outside Nagaland. Yet amongst his own people he is a living legend. His role during the Naga struggle and his immense sacrifices towards the resurgence of the Naga people have made him a leader of whom any people can be rightly proud. The Nagas, like many other tribal people, do not go into ecstasies over their leaders. They have their own quiet way of assessing them, and in this, a man like Imkongmeren ranks very high indeed. Imkongmeren is today an old man and the long years of difficult life in the underground are finally claiming their toll. But this has not dimmed his revolutionary fervour and his firm belief in the eventual realization of his goal. It was this that led him to give up a life of apparent ease for one of hardship and toil in the strife-torn jungles of Nagaland. It is his unswerving faith in his people that has kept him so strong in spirits even today. The son of a '*dubhasi*' ('Dubhasis' were interpreters appointed by the British government and acted as links between the government and the various tribes), Imkongmeren (the name loosely translated means 'known to all the people') was born into a relatively affluent family in the Longkhum village about 10 miles from Mokokchung. When I asked him about the year of his birth, Imkongmeren smiled and told me that in his land very few cared to keep such records, but he was probably born in February 1901. His father had told him that he was born about a month after the 'illuminations'—the illuminations being those made in connection with the coronation of Edward VII in January 1901. The coronation had been celebrated even in the most remote corners of the British Empire and for the villagers of Mokokchung it was naturally a memorable event.

Imkongmeren, who studied up to Class IX in a mission school in Mokokchung, developed an interest in politics from an early age. It was here that he came into contact with various Church organizations. Working with them brought him into close contact with the people of different tribes and he became increasingly aware of their problems. The Church acted as an important formative influence in his life and, according to Imkongmeren, it helped him towards a conscious living. But he denies that the Church was primarily responsible for his political beliefs. The Church had not taught him to be hostile to India but to love his own countrymen more. He did not find anything strange in the Naga people's love of the Church because it was largely through it that the Naga people had rediscovered their self-respect. As to the

charge that the Church was doing away with tribal modes and customs, Imkongmeren was of the view that Naga revivalism has always been one of the main planks of the Naga struggle and that no religion could ever do away with nationalism. It was ridiculous to say that the Nagas had, in adopting Christianity, ceased to be Nagas. They would be Nagas first before anything else.

When asked about Naga youth turning to China for assistance, Imkongmeren looked reserved and one could see that he was a bit uncertain. But he asserted that these young men were not to be blamed. It was the Congress government at the Centre that was responsible, he added. The suppression let loose on the Naga people had forced some sections of the underground to cross over to China and seek assistance. When questioned as to whether Communist assistance would, in the long run, affect the Naga identity, Imkongmeren seemed certain that 'Nagaism' would always remain the first cause of the Naga people. 'Nagaism' was always uppermost in his mind and one could not help feeling that this obsession with 'Nagaism' could well be a 'negative' aspect of the Naga struggle. Imkongmeren had little to comment on when asked as to whether he agreed with those who felt that the Naga cause had suffered because of its 'insular' nature. Despite all setbacks, he seemed to be firm in his belief that the determination of his people would finally compel Delhi to give up its strong-arm tactics and opt for a workable solution of the Naga issue. Imkongmeren agreed that for those who still believed in a separate Naga country, the odds were heavily against them and some middle way must be found. What that middle way would be would have to be decided on the basis of negotiations between the Naga underground and the Centre. But such negotiations, he asserted, should be unconditional and the use of force had to be abjured.

Imkongmeren Ao could not tell me the exact date of his formally joining the Naga National Council; but he has been quite active in politics since the early 1940s. A close associate of A.Z. Phizo, Imkongmeren has been the Vice President of the Naga National Council (NNC), the political wing of the Federal Government of Nagaland, since 1949. Though the Naga federal government was proclaimed only in March 1956, Imkongmeren Ao and his like had, for all practical purposes, gone underground several years prior to that date. He was not much in the news during the Naga peace talks and other negotiations with Delhi

because he was chiefly taken up with organizational work. Having spent over 20 years in the underground, being constantly hunted after, Imkongmeren Ao has come to know his people as few Naga leaders have. He escaped capture by the security forces on several occasions, some of them being hair's breadth escapes. He was finally captured by men of the Nagaland Armed Police in January 1975. Imkongmeren ascribed his capture not to any lack of cooperation on the part of the villagers but to the immense superiority of the security forces in men and material. He was also growing old, and age had finally slowed down his agility. Hence, his rather easy capture by the security forces. After his capture, Imkongmeren was sent to the Nowgong Special Jail in Assam along with over a hundred other Naga prisoners.

Imkongmeren Ao has immense regards for A.Z. Phizo whom he considers to be the father of Naga nationalism. Imkongmeren believes that there can be no solution to the Naga problem without Phizo being taken into confidence. The Shillong agreement would not succeed without Phizo's concurrence and as long as he was kept out of the negotiations a workable solution would not be possible. Although he was reticent about his views on such matters saying that he was a prisoner, it was clear from what he said that Imkongmeren was not too happy about the much-publicized Shillong Agreement. Not all sections of the Naga underground were represented in the talks that led to the agreement and this would naturally make the implementation of such an agreement quite difficult. Events since then have proved that despite the 'accord', tangible peace in Nagaland is still far away.

A deeply religious man with a strong faith in the Bible, Imkongmeren is against all forms of violence. But was not the ruthless suppression of a people's search for an identity the greatest form of violence? It was a wrong notion, he felt, that the Nagas had right from the beginning opted for a violent solution to their problems. On the other hand, it was the Centre's attitude which had forced the Nagas to take up arms to defend their cause. Despite the long and protracted armed struggle of the Nagas, Imkongmeren still has plenty of faith in negotiations, provided of course that the two parties had trust in each other. Imkongmeren believes that the greatest gain of the Naga struggle has been the growth of political consciousness amongst the Naga people. He was confident that since over the years the Nagas have learnt it the hard way, they would always be ready to defend their rights at any cost. The Nagas had

finally discovered their identity and no power could ever snatch it away from them. This was a great gain.

For a man who has given the best years of his life for the cause of his people, Imkongmeren Ao has little to regret over. At peace with himself, he told me that he had only performed his role in a particular period of the history of his people and deserved no credit for it. He had no demands to make of his people and bore his imprisonment without any acrimony or hatred. He appeared equally reluctant to talk about his personal sacrifices. Yet he has suffered much. His wife died while he was in hiding; his 19-year-old son was killed in a clash with the security forces near the Indo-Burma border in 1968; and his property was confiscated by the government. But he seemed to accept these personal tragedies as part of the price he had to pay for the cause so dear to him. Had not many of his countrymen suffered much more?

One hopes that the new government at the Centre will try to view the Naga issue from a more constructive angle. Jayaprakash Narayan himself was actively associated with the search for peace in Nagaland and was one of the members of the Peace Mission which was formed in 1964. Narayan's sympathy for the Nagas is well known and it was only because of an unfortunate misunderstanding that he resigned from the Peace Mission in 1966. The support extended to the new Central government by the United Democratic Front of Nagaland shows that the Naga people are inclined to view Delhi's moves with some trust and confidence. The Prime Minister's willingness to talk with Phizo is a move which has been widely welcomed throughout Nagaland. The Naga underground leaders can also utilize the services of Narayan in the working out of a tangible peace in Nagaland, and in this men like Imkongmeren Ao will have an important role to play.

V. The CPI and the Naga Struggle

The Initial Phase*

The following article is an attempt to trace the stand adopted by the Communist Party of India (CPI) in relation to the Naga

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National Council (NNC)-led struggle, especially during its initial phases. It would perhaps be of interest to note that in its assessment of the Naga situation in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the CPI had broadly backed the demands submitted by the NNC in the form of an ultimatum in November 1947.[1] The CPI, while advocating cultural and regional autonomy for the Naga people, had expressed itself strongly against any military solution of the Naga issue and stressed the need for a negotiated settlement between the Government of India and the NNC.[2] In a memorandum addressed to the Prime Minister of India, the Assam Provincial Committee of the CPI maintained that the demand for a sovereign, independent Nagaland put forward by the NNC was, in effect, a demand for greater autonomy and not for secession from the Indian Union. The CPI memorandum, which we shall presently discuss in detail, is of great significance because it is perhaps the first detailed memorandum drawn up by the party in connection with the first major struggle of a hill nationality in the newly-independent Indian Union. The CPI's stand during the initial years of the Naga struggle is important for our overall understanding of the Left's assessment of the national question just after independence, especially because the CPI at that time was the undisputed leader of the organized Left in the country.

In its memorandum on the Naga issue, the Assam Provincial Committee of the CPI gave a detailed account of the historical background of the situation in the Naga Hills, the British policy of divide-and-rule, the role played by the bureaucracy, and the failure of the Congress leadership to understand the aspirations of the Nagas. On the whole, the memorandum shows a surprisingly clear understanding of the Naga situation and the role played by the NNC. But, the most prominent point which emerges from the memorandum is the conclusion drawn by the CPI on the vital question of the Naga demand for independence.

It may be recalled that as early as June, 1947, the NNC had issued an ultimatum declaring that the Naga Hills would cease to be a part of the Indian Union which would come into being subsequent to the British departure from the subcontinent.[3] Much earlier than this, in 1929, the Naga Club in its memorandum to the Simon Commission had stated that when the British leave India, the Nagas should be left 'as they were' and not 'thrown' into the Indian Union.[4] Although the NNC did

resist British moves to carve out a Crown Colony or to implement the Coupland Plan, yet it consistently maintained that the Nagas constituted a separate and independent nation. This is adequately revealed in the NNC's exchanges with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and in its different statements on the question of an independent Naga homeland.[5]

One of the major planks of the NNC's argument has been that the question of seceding from the Indian Union just did not arise because in the first place, the Naga Hills never formed part of India.[6] On the contrary, the NNC has viewed the Indian presence in Naga territory as an intrusion upon the rights of the Naga people.[7] Even the 10-year Interim Government scheme submitted by the Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Tribes which visited Kohima in May 1947 suggested a virtually independent Naga territory with very marginal powers in defence matters to the Guardian Power.[8] Moreover, the prime factor responsible for the rejection of the Hydari Agreement was the NNC's insistence on the right of the Nagas to complete independence on the expiry of the 10-year period.[9] The demand for an independent and sovereign Nagaland was also made by the NNC delegation which called on Mahatma Gandhi in July 1947.[10] All these instances prove that at no point did the NNC abandon its demand for an independent Naga homeland outside the Indian Union but with some marginal ties with it.

The CPI memorandum of 24 November 1947, which was a reaction to the NNC ultimatum of 4 November 1947, tries to impress upon the Government of India that the NNC was actually leading a struggle for greater autonomy within the Indian Union. But, at no stage did the NNC indicate that it would settle for a fully autonomous Naga homeland without the right to decide its own future, which in turn, meant self-determination for the Naga nationality. The demands for autonomy in executive, judicial, and legislative spheres were concomitant to the acceptance by Delhi of the demand for self-rule. Even the Naga Goodwill Delegation which toured Assam in November–December 1953, insisted that 'separation could arise only when there had been union; in our case, there was not that "union" which would give ground for calling our national struggle to regain the *former sovereignty* a separatists movement, much less an anti-Indian movement since the claim of our *national independence* is not to oppose India'[11] (emphasis mine).

The NNC ultimatum of November 1947 did not equivocate on the question of Naga independence though it stated that 'Nagaland shall

cease to be a part of the Indian Union from 6th December, 1947'.[12] The phrase 'cease to be' need not be read as the NNC's acceptance of Naga Hills as a part of India. It is used to put through the message that Nagaland would declare independence, which the Naga Federal Government eventually did in March 1956.

In the light of the above, it is, therefore, surprising that the carefully drafted CPI memorandum maintains that the... Naga problem was essentially the creation of the bureaucracy headed by the then Governor, Sir Akbar Hydari, rather than a struggle for an independent Naga state. The party presented the problem more as product of the divide-and-rule policy of the British imperialists which, according to it the Indian administrators were still following. Referring to the role of the Governor, the memorandum states:

> ... these outworn tactics of this old bureaucrat, the Governor of Assam, these delaying methods by denying even interim reforms and advances, have done much damage to the forces of unity and progress in the Hills, and helped much to strengthen separatist influence there, driving people to frustrations and desperations. We make bold to assert that the ultimatum of the Naga National Council is also a product of this policy.[13]

Tracing the origin of the differences between the NNC and the Government of India, the CPI memorandum says that these differences between the Assam Congress and the NNC started when the tribal areas sub-committee visited Kohima just prior to independence. After the sub-committee refused to consider the NNC demands, a deadlock occurred and 'at this stage the leaders of the Assam Congress, thinking that the Nagas would not come to terms with them directly, left the initiative of further negotiations in the hands of Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam'.[14]

The CPI holds the Governor responsible for bungling the Naga issue, stating that the Hydari Agreement of June 1947, was insufficient to satisfy the Naga wishes and draws the Prime Minister's attention to 'the niggardly nature of the negotiations'. Regarding the controversial Clause 9 of the Hydari Agreement, the memorandum states that unnecessary fuss should not be created over the 'right to secession' because in any case, the NNC would not insist on it. It is not known as to what factors exactly led the CPI to come to such a conclusion, especially when the NNC had maintained throughout its demand for an independent Naga homeland. The CPI seemed to view the Naga

demand primarily as one for autonomous self-rule in a Naga homeland and not the establishment of a sovereign Nagaland.

The Hydari Agreement which gave far-reaching legislative, executive, and judicial powers to the NNC, was rejected only because, according to the NNC leadership, did not clearly spell out the issue of Naga independence. It may be recalled here that the Hydari Agreement did not find favour with the Nehru government because it had made too many 'concessions' to the NNC. While discussing the NNC's demand, that the Nagas be given the right 'to decide their own future' at the end of 10 years, the CPI memorandum states:

> This insistence of the Naga people on the right to secession may, to any superficial observer, seem to be an isolationist and even disruptive trend, and so far as our reports go, the bureaucrats functioning in the Naga Hills and their guide and philosopher friend, the Governor of Assam, also think like that ... But we feel deeply that the Government may not misconstrue these simple and straightforward people.[15]

After drawing up a detailed account of the historico-political developments in the Naga Hills, the CPI memorandum concludes by saying:

> At the end, we would further emphasise by asserting that 'the right to secession' (so much stressed upon by the Nagas is still now not a separatist gain; and the Indian Union by agreeing to the State's "peoples" the right to decide their own future, may not and should not throw it out ... we are sure ... that Indian democracy is bold enough to fulfill their freedom urge in the most graceful manner.[16]

Thus, some of the salient points of the CPI stand vis-à-vis the Naga struggle are the acceptance of the NNC as the sole representative organization of the Naga people, the reading of the Naga demand for 'home rule' as not one aimed at the creation of an independent, sovereign Naga country outside the Indian Union but one aimed at autonomy, and the insistence on a negotiated settlement of the Naga issue preferably through direct intervention of the Prime Minister as against dependence on the bureaucracy. The overall tone of the memorandum exudes a large degree of sympathy for the NNC-led movement which, according to the CPI should not be misconstrued as a separatist agitation but seen and acknowledged as one involving the national urge of the Naga people. Although in its memorandum, the CPI does not

give its views for or against the NNC demands as listed in the NNC ultimatum, yet there are no adverse comments on any of these. Rather, the memorandum projects the NNC's case on a favourable light.

The CPI's advocacy of the Naga struggle as one for autonomy led to subsequent allegations that the party was encouraging the secessionist movement in the Naga Hills.[17] But, CPI sources maintain that Premier Gopinath Bardoloi had requested CPI leaders from Assam to help initiate a dialogue with the 'extremist' faction within the NNC.[18] It is not known as to exactly what degree of influence these CPI leaders had over the NNC leadership, but the party in the 1940s did take an active interest in the developments in the Naga Hills and it had helped to form the Hill Students Federation under the leadership of T. Aliba Imti, L.D. Brian, and Vanthuan.[19]

The CPI's stand in relation to the NNC-led Naga struggle in the late 1940s cannot surely be analysed without taking into consideration the changes that were undergoing in the CPI's assessment of the national and the international situation in the first few years following Indian Independence. It may be recalled that towards the end of 1947, under the influence of the Zhdanov thesis, the CPI under B.T. Ranadive's leadership had opted for a democratic front which would launch an all-out struggle against the Nehru government. The period 1947–9 was marked by sharp struggle against the bourgeoisie and the government which had accepted 'fake independence'.[20] This was followed by increasing pressure from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the CPI to abandon its line of armed struggle and come out in support of Nehru's foreign policy. The Draft Programme and the Statement of Policy of 1951 ushered in a new approach towards the Nehru government with violence and insurrectionary struggle being given up in favour of parliamentary methods. American imperialism came to be regarded as the chief enemy and hence it was considered necessary to render support to Nehru's foreign policy.[21] This change in the CPI's ideological standpoint needs to be taken into consideration when one analyses the party's assessment of the Naga struggle in the early 1950s.

The CPI's 1946 stand regarding the NNC's demand for an independent Naga homeland must be viewed in the light of the party's stand on the problem of the nationalities in India. The 1943 resolution of the party on the nationality issue clearly states that 'every section of the

Indian people which has contiguous territory as its homeland, common historical tradition, common language, culture, psychological make-up and common economic life would be recognised as a distinct nationality with the *right to secede* [author's emphasis] from it (India) if it may so desire'. In the intervening period, 1943–6, there was no major change in the CPI's position vis-à-vis the nationalities and, therefore, the party considered it quite logical to extend support, albeit indirectly, to the NNC's stand.

By the mid-1950s, however, change in the Soviet approach to the Nehru government coupled with the CPI's abandonment of armed struggle in favour of peaceful transition to socialism brought about a change in the CPI''s stand regarding the NNC-led struggle. As the insurrection grew in the Naga Hills and as the Government of India moved in security forces to tackle the problem, the CPI abandoned its earlier argument that the NNC would not seriously fight for Naga independence. The party now saw the NNC-led struggle for 'home rule' or 'self-determination' as an unrealistic demand aided and abetted by imperialist forces, led by the U.S.A., who wished to destabilize the country which under Nehru's leadership was emerging as a partner of the Soviet Union in the fight between the proponents of world peace and the imperialist warmongers. The CPI now insisted that the Nagas could realize their destiny as a separate nationality only *within* the Indian Union. While discussing this, Phani Bora, Secretary of the Assam State Committee of the CPI wrote in 1956:

> The Nagas are mechanically repeating the arguments and demands of the Indian national movement against British imperialism in their own separatist claim. The Nagas can neither win nor retain their independence outside the Indian Union. They have justified grievances against the Indian Government, but the only way to remedy them is to unite with the democratic opinion in India. Naga independence is an integral part of Indian independence ... Naga separatism is a problem created by the British and unwittingly nursed by Indian Chauvinism.[22]

Bora went on to say that 'the imperialist, separatist propaganda had gone so deep among the Nagas as to twist their national consciousness into demanding Naga independence to avoid what they feared would be Indian domination after the British quit India'.[23] The Naga demand for independence was now viewed by the CPI as imperialism's post-war plan. This is evidently a major departure from the position adopted by

the CPI in November 1947, when it had termed the Hydari Agreement as 'niggardly' and insufficient to meet the NNC's demands. Thus, within a period of barely 10 years, the NNC, considered to be the sole representative of the Naga masses, came to be viewed as a tool in the hands of the imperialists.

Phani Bora's booklet, *Nagas: The Real Story* was the first of its kind to be brought out by any political party or organization dealing with the struggle of a hill nationality. The booklet details the atrocities committed on the civilian population in the Naga Hills and calls for a negotiated settlement of the Naga issue. In line with the party's view, Bora suggests the revision of the Sixth Schedule to accommodate the aspirations of the Nagas and the other hill peoples of the northeast. He advocates an 'advanced form of regional autonomy' to win back the Nagas to India's fold.[24] But, on the question of secession, the stand is clear now. It is an imperialist plot against the Government of India.

The resolution on the Naga problem adopted in June 1956 by the Central Committee of the CPI fixed responsibility for creating the situation in the Naga Hills primarily on the Government of India, though it admits that the 'demand for independence of the Nagas was raised long before, in 1946 itself'.[25] This goes contrary to the assertion made in the memorandum of 1947 that the NNC was actually fighting for autonomy and not secession. The Central committee resolution makes its position clear by stating that 'the Party never supported the Naga demand for separation from India and repeatedly advised them to give up their demand for independence and fight in co-operation with the people of India for a democratic set up in the Naga Hills'. It adds that the CPI was 'the first to expose the conspiracies of the imperialists through the foreign missionaries which were based on stirring and disseminating anti-Indian prejudices and led the Nagas to advocate the wrong and separatist demand for an independent Nagaland'.[26] This shows that the party's emphasis had changed and it had now come to view the NNC-led struggle as an imperialist plot and the Nagas as being moved by 'anti-Indian prejudices'. The resolution, however, calls for the enlargement of the autonomous rights of the Naga people 'in the field of internal administration' and for the recognition of 'their full rights in the matter of language, culture and tribal customs'. A similar viewpoint is put forward in an editorial of the *New Age* dated 1 July 1955.[27] The ambiguity which marked the 1947 memorandum had, by

the mid-1950s, been replaced by a call for regional autonomy for the Nagas within the Indian Union. This was to be worked out through, negotiations with 'all patriotic Naga leaders'.[28]

Notes

1. Ultimatum submitted by the Naga National Council to the Government of India, 4 November 1947.

2. Memorandum submitted by the Prime Minister of India by the Assam Provincial Committee of the CPI, 24 November 1947.

3. M. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland* (Kohima: Naga Institute of Culture, 1970), p. 169.

4. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, 162–4.

5. M. Aram, *Peace in Nagaland* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinneman, 1974), p. 117.

6. Udayon Misra,'The Naga National Question', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIII, No. 14, Bombay, 8 April 1978.

7. The Peace Mission consisting of Jayaprakash Narayan, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, and Rev. Michael Scott viewed the Naga struggle as one for 'national freedom'. Refer Aram, *Peace in Nagaland*, p. 38.

8. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, p. 170.

9. Clause 9 of the Hydari Agreement ran thus: 'The Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Government of the Indian Union will have special responsibility for a period of ten years to ensure the due observance of the Agreement; at the end of the period, the Naga National Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding a future of the Naga people be arrived at'. The NNC insisted that this clause gave the Nagas the right to decide their own future after 10 years and to move out of the Indian Union if they so desired. The Government of India insisted that the clause did not give the Nagas the right to secede.

10. Alemchiba. *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, p. 173; Misra, 'The Naga National Question', p. 620.

11. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland.*

12. NNC Memorandum.

13. CPI Memorandum.

14. CPI Memorandum.

15. CPI Memorandum.

16. CPI Memorandum.

17. Misra, Prafulla, 'Communist Movement in Assam', *North-Eastern Affairs*, (Shillong: July–Sept. 1972), p. 37.

18. 'Communist Movement in Assam', p. 37.
19. 'Communist Movement in Assam', p. 37.
20. Mohan Ram, *Indian Communism*(New Delhi:Vikas Publishing House, 1969), pp. 14–16.
21. *Indian Communism*, pp. 60–5.
22. Phani Bora, *Nagas: The Real Story* (New Delhi: CPI Publication, 1956), p. 22.
23. *Nagas: The Real Story*, p. 17.
24. Ibid., p. 24.
25. CPI Central Committee Resolution on the Naga problem, 1956.
26. CPI Central Committee Resolution on the Naga problem, 1956.
27. 'End the Miniature War in Naga Hills', *New Age* (New Delhi, 1956).
28. 'End the Miniature War in Naga Hills'.

VI Alternate Voices within the Naga Movement*

In those heady days of the beginnings of the Naga struggle in the 1950s led by the Naga National Council (NNC) and its leader Angami Zapo Phizo, few could have imagined the present situation in Nagaland where factional killings have taken hundreds of lives and the divide on tribe and clan lines taking on new proportions. A wide array of Naga intellectuals and social activists are agreed on the fact that behind the veneer of Naga nationalism there has emerged a deeply divided society where loyalty to one's tribe quite often supersedes everything else. This naturally leads us to the question as to how such a unified movement which virtually gave birth to the idea of the Naga nation could have resulted in such fragmentation and violence, with the idea of reconciliation having taken on an urgency and precedence over all other factors.

* Revised version of paper read at a seminar organized by the CSA and C-NES held at New Delhi in July 2010.

What began initially with a given sense of homogeneity and a more or less single voice is today characterized by internal strife represented by multiple voices within the movement and claims of territoriality represented by the concept of Nagalim. Any effort, therefore, to understand the present predicament in Naga politics and the contrary pulls within the broad rubric of the Naga national struggle, one must try to analyse the alternate voices within the Naga movement right from the beginning and the inability of the NNC leadership to resolve the inner contradictions in a spirit of dialogue and democratic discussion.

The initial years (1946–50) of the Naga movement were quite momentous because from the birth of the NNC in February 1946 (reconstituted out of the Naga Hills District Council which had been formed in 1945 at the initiative of the then British Deputy Commissioner Charles Pawsey) till the election of Angami Zapu Phizo as President of the NNC in November 1949, one sees the emergence of a consolidated all-Naga consciousness which attempts to go beyond the divide of tribe and clan to forge a common Naga identity, yet the basis of which happened to be the traditional power structures of Naga society.[1] It is significant that the Government of India (GOI) had almost arrived at an agreement with an organization which claimed to represent all the Naga tribes but whose credentials had not been tested in any democratic platform. Nonetheless, the NNC was given the right to control almost every aspect of Naga life ranging from customary laws to ownership of land and taxation.

From this, it appears that at the time of the Hydari Agreement, the NNC considered itself as the sole organization of their country.[2] This was followed by negotiations which the NNC had with the sub-committee on North-East Frontier Tribal Areas and Assam Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas, when the former demanded an 'interim government' for a period of 10 years with full legislative, judicial, and administrative powers. But a deadlock ensued over the 10-year guardianship scheme, which was attempted to be broken by the Hydari Agreement of 1946.[3] Without going into the contentious clause which led to different interpretations by the Government of India and the NNC, what seems relevant today is that this was an agreement between the Government of India and the NNC which was by no means a fully representative body of the Nagas at that time. Nor was it in any sense an elected body. Nonetheless, the NNC was accepted by the Indian govern-

ment as the sole representative authority of the different Naga tribes and it was given the right to control almost every aspect of Naga life ranging from customary laws to ownership of land and taxation. From this, it appears that at the time of the Hydari Agreement, the NNC considered itself as the sole organized voice of the Nagas (with every Naga being assumed to be a member of the NNC) and its decisions were accepted as part of their 'national voice'.

The NNC, on its part, proved its popular base through the 'plebiscite' that it conducted from May to August 1951, followed by the total boycott of the general elections of 1952. Although this period was rightly seen as one of unprecedented consolidation of Naga nationalist forces, yet what is often overlooked is the fact that at that time there was no unanimity even within the leadership of the NNC on questions related to self-rule, homerule, or independence. No real effort was made by the NNC to resolve these differences and all dissent and disagreement was attempted to be done away with in the name of Naga independence. Perhaps, the entire course of the Naga struggle would have been different had an attempt been made to resolve some of these questions in a democratic manner within the NNC.

The period from the early 1950s till the 1960s saw the consolidation of Naga nationalism and the hegemony of the Phizo-led NNC. The failure of the Hydari Agreement and the marginalization of the moderate voices within the NNC paved the way for the adoption of the line of armed struggle under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo against the Indian state which, in turn, committed the blunder of initially viewing the Naga movement as a law and order problem with secessionist overtones. The excesses committed by the Indian security forces which included the infamous village regrouping scheme, further helped the NNC to consolidate its position as the sole, unquestioned voice of the Naga people. It is significant that though the leadership of the NNC was drawn largely from the incipient Naga middle class, yet no threat was posed by it to the traditional leadership of the tribal councils.[4] Rather, Phizo made it a point to win over the traditional structures of power and this brought him and the NNC immediate gains, though analysts have pointed out that, in the long run, such a move encouraged the growth of tribalism within the organization.[5] But what needs to be noted at this point is that even as the NNC was consolidating itself as the national organization of the Naga people, there were several alternate

voices within the movement, which were either silenced or marginalized. In this connection one may refer to the position adopted by the NNC secretary, T. Sakhrie who was one of the leading statesmen of the Naga struggle. Having consistently argued for Naga independence during the early years, Sakhrie ultimately developed differences with Phizo over the course and content of the struggle and was eliminated on 20 January 1956. Just prior to his abduction and murder, Sakhrie had planned to reorganize the NNC and, along with Jasokie, had called for a general session of the organization on 30 January 1956.

Sakhrie's elimination silenced for the time being the other alternate voices within the Naga movement and paved the way for the armed struggle against the GOI by the newly established Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) (March 1956). Although Naga 'nationalist' historians have tried to overlook these tensions and have highlighted the united struggle of the emerging Naga nation against the might of the Indian nation-state, yet it certainly began a process of inter-tribe friction, which would ultimately prove quite costly for the entire movement.[6] It is only recently that Sakhrie's role in the Naga struggle has come up for serious revaluation.[7]

This was also the period of increasing manoeuvres on the part of the Indian nation-state which tried to combine repressive legislative measures with attempts to provide some political space in the form of a separate state for the Naga people within the constitutional parameter. The setting up of the Naga People's Convention (NPC) under the leadership of Dr Imkongliba Ao in 1957 and the subsequent discussions it held with the GOI may be seen as the first major challenge during this period to the hegemony of the NNC as well as the first major assertion of an alternate voice within the Naga movement. The Sixteen Point Agreement leading to the formation of the state of Nagaland and the inauguration of an interim body headed by Imkongliba Ao in February 1961 showed that there were indeed alternate voices within the broad Naga movement which did not subscribe to the politics of armed struggle. But the assassination of Dr Ao just six months later showed that the then leadership of the NNC was not prepared to accept any of these alternate voices.

Nevertheless, the Constitution Act (Thirteenth Amendment) of 1962 was passed, which may be said to have expanded the parameters of the Indian nation-state for the first time by incorporating Article 371(A) in

the Constitution. This period also marked the first major civil society intervention in the Naga struggle (Peace Mission of 1964) leading to a ceasefire between the GOI and the Naga Federal Government as well as the first successful assembly elections. With this, one may say that the marginalization of the NNC had begun.[8] Though this marginalization has been seen as a fallout of tribalism within the organization which took on new proportions after parallel structures of power were introduced following the creation of Nagaland state and the introduction of representative democracy, yet, while discussing all this, one must take into account the NNC leadership's failure to accommodate alternate voices within the movement, especially after Phizo went into self-exile in 1957.[9]

The 1960s and 1970s saw the intensification of rivalries within the Naga Movement, especially before and after the Shillong Accord of 1975 which was rejected by a large section of the Naga movement leaders. Although there is general unanimity regarding the surreptitious manner in which the accord was brought about by the GOI, yet the fact cannot be overlooked that a certain section within the Naga Movement, however small, had opted for a solution within the Indian constitution.[10] That the Naga Movement was made up of multiple voices and that there was no unanimity even over the question of Naga sovereignty may be seen from the course and content of negotiations that followed between representative of Naga groups and the GOI much before the Shillong Accord had been signed. For instance, during the 1966–67 negotiations with the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi,[11] a section of the underground including leaders like Kaito Sema and Kughato Sukhai seemed to favour maximum autonomy within the Indian Union.[12] But the FGN continued to insist on full sovereignty, while the Tatar Hoho insisted that there could be no understanding without Phizo's approval. From this it is clear that no attempt was made to accommodate the divergent views within the movement. On the contrary, Kaito Sema was gunned down in Kohima in August 1968, thereby adding to the growing rift between Kaito's supporters and the NNC leadership.[13] This was followed by an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the Nagaland Chief Minister Hokishe Sema (in 1972). Though analysts have attempted to read into this the inter-tribe faultlines in Naga society, it also needs to be stressed that had there been some inner party democracy within the NNC and the FGN, such a situation could perhaps have been avoided.

Following the breakdown of the talks with Mrs Gandhi, the Indo–Naga confrontation took on new overtones with China directly coming into the picture.[14] After the defeat of the Pakistan Army and the emergence of Bangladesh, the section within the NNC led by T. Muivah and Mowu Angami sought Chinese assistance and the ground was prepared for a split within the NNC. The Shillong Accord of 1975 merely hastened this split, although in years immediately preceding the accord, there were some attempts within the organization to accommodate diverse voices. The formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 put a final end to all such efforts, with the NSCN manifesto declaring Phizo as a spent force, which had turned 'treacherous and reactionary'.[15] The militaristic structure of the NSCN which was quite different from that of the NNC,[16] left even less scope for alternate voices and it was but inevitable that differences would crop up between the Vice Chairman S.S. Khaplang and the Chairman and General Secretary of the NSCN. These differences ultimately led to a split in 1988.[17] Ever since then, the two factions of the NSCN have been at loggerheads and hundreds of lives have been lost in the turf war between the two groups.

Although initially there was a tendency to dismiss the NSCN (Khaplang) [NSCN (K)] as being set up by the Government of India to bring about divisions within the Naga movement, yet over the years this position has substantially changed. Not only has the NSCN(K) survived through the years despite the balance of men and arms being clearly in favour of its rival, it has also succeeded in making its voice heard on several major issues confronting the Naga nation. Moreover, it has been consistently maintaining that lasting peace could be ensured in Nagaland only if all those sections associated actively with the Naga struggle[18] were made part of the peace negotiations with the GOI. Initially, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac-Muivah) [NSCN (I–M)] was prone to dismiss such claims and maintained that it had the sole backing of the Naga people to carry on negotiations with New Delhi. But, interestingly, the position which the NSCN (I–M) commanded in the 1990s, when its leaders were virtually treated as state guests by New Delhi, seems to have undergone certain major changes in the last ten years or so. As the peace talks with the NSCN (I–M) initiated in 1997 continued, alternate voices within the Naga Movement started making

their presence felt and, in the year 2001, New Delhi finally announced its ceasefire with the NSCN (K) and declared that efforts were being made to include the smaller groups in the peace process.

The question of a unified Nagalim and the ceasefire with then NSCN (I–M) without territorial limits resulted in massive resistance from Manipur and the GOI was forced to withdraw it. Even on the question of Nagalim, the NSCN (K) had its own position. Therefore, the differences between these two groups cannot be dismissed as mere inter-tribe rivalry but must be accepted as the presence of alternate voices in the Naga Movement, something which the sympathizers of the NSCN (I–M) are loath to admit. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the factional killings of 2003–04 and the intensity of the turf wars between the two factions in 2006–07[19] which compelled the major civil-society groups of Nagaland to initiate a process to stop the fratricidal killings and set up the Forum for Reconciliation in 2008. This was followed by the Covenant of Reconciliation which was signed by the three major groups of the Naga Movement. Attempts by Naga civil society groups to draw on the experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission are also being made.[20] The latest situation arising out of Muivah's attempt to visit his home village of Somdal in Manipur and the subsequent blockade have united an overwhelming majority of the Nagas both in Nagaland and Manipur on ethno-nationalist lines. But, it is significant that even within this expression of solidarity there have been dissenting voices[21] which indicate the presence of a democratic framework within Naga society which is not necessarily reflected in the structure of the militant outfits.

In a rather belated acknowledgement of the presence of such alternate voices, Muivah has recently stated that he is willing to meet S.S. Khaplang and work towards reconciliation. However, it would be wrong on Muivah's part if he thought that reconciliation meant the acceptance of the NCSN (I–M) viewpoint.[22] The question of first arriving at territorial unification before a 'political' solution is worked out has also been questioned by certain Naga voices. In the light of all this, it is evident that the issue of Naga sovereignty has now been marginalized somewhat by the issue of territorial unification and reconciliation. Till recently, however, the two most important issues posed by the Naga movement have been: (a) the question of Naga sovereignty/

self-determination, and (b) the question of a unified Nagalim/Greater Nagalim.[23] To this has now been added the question of reconciliation among the different segments of the Naga Movement.

While the issue of a unified Nagalim is bound to face insurmountable hurdles in the form of opposition from the neighbouring states and would also involve the changing of existing state boundaries under the provisions of Articles 2-3 of the Constitution of India, it is also bound to create problems for the Naga populations residing in these states. The public response in neighbouring states like Assam and Arunachal to the blockade of Manipur showed, among other things, that the sympathies of the peoples of these states lay largely with the people of Manipur. This, in turn, is bound to affect New Delhi's perception of the problem, all its dilly-dallying notwithstanding. What is further important is that the insistence on a unified Nagalim is bound to eat into the common struggle and solidarity of the people's of the northeastern region for a truly federal relationship with the Indian Union. As for the all-important issue of Naga reconciliation, it needs to be remembered that historically, it is beyond the imagination of the different Naga tribes to totally merge or surrender their identities in what may be termed as the greater fabric of Naga nationalism. The in-built autonomy/self-governance of each tribe is as unique a part of the Naga historical tradition as is the stated uniqueness of the Nagas as a whole. Any attempt, therefore, to reduce this autonomy in the name of a wider and more encompassing Naga national identity is bound to meet with different degrees of resistance.[24]

Therefore, any process of national reconciliation would have to involve the acceptance of alternate voices within the broader Naga Movement. This is exactly where one feels that the leaders of the different streams of the Naga Movement have not been able to create the necessary spaces for viable democratic functioning and transparency. Any national movement which fails to accommodate the divergent views and which lacks the capacity for self-criticism and democratic functioning marked by inner-party debate, invariably ends up in a cul-de-sac of contradictions which prove increasingly difficult to resolve. This is all the more true of the Naga Movement which began as a move to bring together the different warring tribes on a united national platform to fight a common enemy which it felt was posing a threat to the identity and culture of the Naga people as a whole. The attempts to present a

consolidated national platform by referring to the 'unique' history of the Nagas and their right to live under a common territorial unit have not been successful precisely because of the clan/tribe based structure of the Naga society.

When one refers to the unique history of the Naga people as emphasized time and again by the NSCN (I–M) during its negotiations with the Government of India, it also needs to be remembered that this very uniqueness draws its strength from the autonomous character of village/clan/tribe functioning on which the traditional structures of power revolve. Therefore, to see it from another angle, the success of the very appeal of a consolidated, unified Naga national identity would eventually depend on how well it would be able to accommodate these unique autonomous structures that exist within Naga society. Thus, the very uniqueness can at times prove to be a challenge to the idea of a common Naga national identity. That is exactly why the present process of reconciliation within the Naga Movement has taken on such important overtones. It is the internal contradictions within the Naga Movement that need to be seriously addressed at the present juncture and the outcome of the peace negotiations as well as the question of a unified Nagalim hinges on this. The process of alienation of certain segments within the movement which started in the late 1950s has reached such a point today that the need for reconciliation and unity within the movement seems to override all other factors. It is in this that the vibrant Naga civil society will have to continue with its purposeful intervention.

Notes

1. That the NNC would try to build up its organization on the support it received from the tribal village councils would in the long run prove to be one of its major inner contradictions.

2. Yusoso Yuno, *The Rising Naga* (New Delhi: Vivek Publishing House, 1974), p. 165.

3. Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS), 2000), p. 32.

4. Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), p. 48.

5. S.K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North-East India* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1973), p. 98.

6. Refer to Phizo's move to occupy Kohima in June 1956 and the virtual withdrawal of support by Kaito Sema. Also see Udayon Misra, 'Conflict Timeline' (1946–2007) in Radha Kumar (ed.), *Negotiating Peace in Deeply Divided Societies* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), pp. 148–246.

7. Ahu Sakhrie, *The Vision of T. Sakhrie for a Naga Nation*, Printed and published by Dr T. Terhuja, President, Lievuse Clan, Kohima, 2006. In the course of a discussion on this paper, prominent Naga civil society leader Niketu Iralu pointed out that following Sakhrie's murder, there was a vertical split in the village of Khonoma and that only recently efforts at reconciliation have been bearing fruit.

8. Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: IIAS, 2000), p. 46.

9. Although later on the NSCN accused Phizo of being a traitor to the Naga cause by espousing ethnocentric policies and of promoting his tribe above all the others, the fact remains that it was he who had successfully galvanized the different tribes into a nation by giving them a corporate will. His limitation perhaps lay in his inability to give space to other voices within the movement. Recently however, there seems to have been some change in the NSCN (I-M)'s approach regarding Phizo's role in the Naga struggle and it has been stressing on the need for reconciliation, even if it be for tactical reasons.

10. 'Annexure V: Naga Accords: An Instance of Domination through Negotiation' in *Naga Resistance and the Peace Process* (New Delhi: Other Media Communications, 2001), p. 37.

11. The FGN delegation which met Mrs Gandhi in February 1966 included Kughato Sema and Issak Swu, the present Chairman of the NSCN (I–M).

12. Mrs Gandhi is said to have proposed that all other subjects other than defence, external affairs, currency, and communications be left to the state.

13. T. Muivah was the General Secretary of the NNC at that time and Mowu Angami was the chief of the Naga army. Kaito was the Defence Minister. Following Kaito's murder, Kaito's Sema supporters set up the Revolutionary Government of Nagaland which ultimately arrived at an understanding with the Government of India in 1973, two years before the Shillong Accord.

14. The ceasefire with the FGN which had been there since 1964 was formally called off by the GOI and the NNC and the FGN were declared illegal under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967.

15. In its statement of 1984, the NSCN condemned Phizo for promoting tribalism within the Naga Movement and for exclusively espousing the cause of one particular tribe.

16. Refer chapters on the Naga struggle in Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland*, (Shimla: IIAS, 2000).

17. In April 1988, Khaplang's forces mounted an offensive against the NSCN (I–M) headquarters and several hundred cadres were killed while Muivah and Swu managed to escape.

18. This includes the NNC/FGN, the NSCN (I–M) and the NSCN (K), the Naga Hoho, and Naga civil society organizations.

19. Sashinungla, 'Nagaland: Insurgency and Factional Intransigence', *Faultlines*, Vol. 16 (New Delhi: Institute of Conflict Management), http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume16/Article4.htm

20. Kesheli Chishi, 'My Experience with the Naga Peace Initiative: Women Activists and Conflict', *Concerns and Voices: Essays on Gender and Society*, Vol. II (Guwahati: Cotton College Women's Forum, 2010).

21. Refer statement made by NSCN (K) leaders including Khaplang regarding Muivah's proposed visit as well as on the question of greater Nagalim.

22. Refer to NSCN(K) statement published in the *Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, 7 June 2010, which offers a sharp critique of the position adopted by NSCN (I–M) as well as by some civil society bodies and questions the right of T. Muivah to represent all the Nagas. Also see, 'NSCN-K against Muivah's visit to Sumi area', the *Assam Tribune,* 22 June 2010, for report on Sumi Hoho's stand on the issue. Available at http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jun2210/oth06 .

23. Udayon Misra, 'Towards a Resolution of the Naga Issue' in Monirul Hussain (ed.), *Coming out of Violence: Essays on Ethnicity, Conflict Resolution, and Peace Process in North-east India* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2005), pp. 160–9.

24. 'NSCN-K against Muivah's visit to Sumi area', the *Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, 22 June 2010. Available at http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jun2210/oth06 .

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Chapter 3

ASSAM
Identity Movements and Insurgent Politics

A
Assamese Identity Issues

I Introduction

The question of Assamese identity has long occupied the centre stage of society and politics in Assam. Beginning with the late nineteenth century when the issue of Assamese identity formed the central discourse during the struggle to bring about the restoration of the status of the Assamese language, the issue was hotly debated in the Assam Legislative Assembly in the 1940s against the context of continued influx of land-hungry peasants from East Bengal. In later years the issue was compounded by demographic changes brought about by the influx from East Pakistan and the then Bangladesh. The Assam Movement on the foreign nationals' issue once again brought the issue of Assamese identity to the forefront and it continues to remain unresolved till date.[1] It is against such a background that the article on Assamese identity tries to trace the course of changes that have occurred in the process of Assamese nationality formation and how its defining parameters have been changing because of a variety of factors. The story of the Assamese national question, which begins with the struggle for linguistic identity and the quest for a homogeneous homeland, has been beset by major challenges in the form of swift demographic changes, the alienation of certain tribal communities which had formed the main plank of Assamese culture, and the expansion of its parameters to take in new communities and linguistic groups.[2] In short, the Assamese national

quest has revealed the inherent contradictions of trying to carve out a homogeneous identity in a highly plural and heterogeneous situation.

The confusions and inherent contradictions that mark the Assamese national question today are perhaps best reflected in the rise, consolidation, and denouement of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). It began as an organization committed to defend the rights of the ethnic Assamese against influx and demographic change. But its quest for an independent or *Swadhin* Asom got increasingly enmeshed in the complicated ethnic and linguistic scenario of the state, even as the militant outfit embarked on a policy of violence against communities and groups whom it saw as impediments in its long-term struggle. It tried to draw heavily from the reservoir of Assamese national sentiment which itself was built on a long history of independent existence and successful repulsion of foreign invasions till, of course, the collapse of the 600-year-old Ahom rule and the coming of the British. The idea of a Swadhin Asom was not new to the Assamese, it having its resonances even when Assam was part of the Indian freedom struggle.[3] ULFA's struggle for an independent Assam or Swadhin Asom was, in many senses, a part of the Assamese middle class' quest for a homogeneous homeland. But it didn't take long for the ULFA to realize that such a quest would be impossible to achieve in a highly plural and heterogeneous society made up of diverse ethnolinguistic groups which came under the broad umbrella of the Assamese nation. Added to this was the fact that nationality formation was still an ongoing process with the parameters of the Assamese nationality constantly expanding to accommodate new entrants. Hence, the ULFA was left with no option but to initially abandon its plank of Assamese ethno-nationalism and extend its struggle to include not just the Assamese people but the 'people of Assam', a term which obviously referred to the various ethnic communities as well as the large segment of immigrant Muslims known as the *na-Asamiyas* or the 'new Assamese'.[4] But, like the proponents of Assamese linguistic identity in the early part of the last century who were so taken up with the struggle to defend the Assamese language that they had little time to think of the interests of the tribal communities whose land question was assuming alarming proportions, the ULFA too could not clearly define its position on the tribal question. At one point it insisted on 'detribalization'[5] as a stage for a common struggle against Indian colonialism, but the move backfired and ended up alienat-

ing several of the smaller ethnic groups who had long been considered as integral parts of the broader Assamese nationality. During the three decades of ULFA's armed struggle, these ethnic groups have asserted their identity and succeeded in wresting certain concessions from the Indian state. Although right from the beginning the ULFA succeeded in attracting young men from all the communities and tribal groups of the state, yet it failed to create a common united national platform of the people of Assam. One of the reasons for this was the Assamese perception of national identity has always been confined to that of linguistic identity alone and this has proved to be self-defeating in the long run. The ULFA too, all its statements regarding the national question notwithstanding, had essentially failed to move out of the groove of linguistic nationalism.[6]

Even as its efforts to weld together the different small nationalities on a common platform of armed struggle against the Indian state met with increasing roadblocks, the ULFA adopted a policy of violence and extortion. Beginning with the gunning down of prominent non-Assamese businessmen during the initial period of its formation, the ULFA seemed to focus primarily on the elimination of its political rivals and in the targeting of civilians.[7] This, combined with its authoritarian militaristic structure, progressively alienated the organization from the common masses who had initially seemed quite enthused by the sacrifice and dedication of the 'boys'. Though the organization survived several major army operations against it and the co-coordinated elimination of its cadres by the State, yet, over the years, it never made any serious attempt to gauge the people's will. The lack of inner democracy within the organization, the intolerance of any signs of dissent and the dominance of the armed wing, ultimately led to defections/surrenders by different sections of the ULFA, culminating in the surrender and arrest of its chairman and several other key functionaries in December 2009. The ULFA's Bangladesh connection was also one of the factors which alienated it from the average Assamese who has always been burdened by the fear that the influx from that country would one day reduce the majority status of the Assamese people within the state. At its present juncture, the organization is split down the middle,[8] with the pro-talk faction led by its chairman having totally dissociated itself with the idea of a sovereign Asom. Instead, it is trying to keep the channel of talks open with New Delhi on the basis of an agenda prepared for

it by a conglomerate of civil society bodies which focuses on wresting some political and economic concessions for the indigenous people of the state. The question of safeguarding Assamese identity, updating of the National Register for Citizens and the conferment of tribal status for all the indigenous communities of Assam formed the crux of the ULFA's demands during the latest round of negotiations with the Centre.[9] Similar demands have long been made by other organizations including the All Assam Students Union (AASU), the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad, and the regional political parties. The question that is naturally being asked is why so much blood had to be spilled over more than three decades of struggle for a sovereign Assam when the end result has boiled down to a demand for the protection of ethnic identities? Ideologically bankrupt and with its support base massively eroded, the ULFA today is left without a cause. On the strength of its money power and large inventory of sophisticated weapons, if not anything else, the faction of the ULFA led by its commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah would certainly continue to be an important reference point in the state's politics. But given the swiftly changing political scenario of the state, it is doubtful if the issue of sovereignty will strike a sympathetic chord among the Assamese ever again.

However, the fall of the curtain on ULFA does not signify that the issues thrown up in the course of its armed struggle against the Indian state are no longer relevant. The colonial thesis put forward by the ULFA still has a strong appeal amongst several student and youth organizations of the state and, given the poor state of economic progress in the state it is but natural that other outfits will continue to pitch their tents on the soil of deprivation. It is significant that Assam today is in a state of greater ferment than any other region of the northeast and issues ranging from development and people's rights to the dispensation of federal powers and the rights of states over their resources have acquired a new edge. This lends credence to the view that Assam perhaps continues to pose a greater challenge to the Indian nation-state than the other sates of the northeastern region. There are diverse reasons for this. Identity politics which began with linguistic assertion in the first decade after Independence has traversed a long and tortuous course spawning ever new movements for political and territorial space. That the situation in Assam is far from normal may be gauged from the fact that the National Human Rights Commission recorded 87 encounter deaths in Assam

during 2011–12, the highest in the country. This was stated by the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs in the Lok Sabha in May 2012. The figure surpassed similar state killings in other insurgency-affected areas such as Kashmir or Manipur. By contrast, troubled Manipur registered 17 encounter deaths during the same period. What is disturbing is that the number of encounter deaths has been on a rise in Assam. From 31 such deaths in the year 2009–10, it went up to 54 in the succeeding year and then shot up to 87 in 2011. This clearly suggests that the encounter killings have been carried out by using the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act[10] as a shield to protect the perpetrators of such crimes. It is obvious that even as killings by different militant groups have been declining over the past few years, extra-juridical killings by the State have been on the rise, particularly in Assam. This, despite the assertions made by both the Centre and the state governments that, with ULFA and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) activities on the wane and peace talks being initiated with several of the other insurgent groups, the law-and-order situation in the state has improved. What then has warranted such a situation? Who are those young men gunned down in encounters, most of which happen to be staged ones? Why is it that the roll call of the dead continues?

While the State has been taking full advantage of factionalism within militant outfits and interethnic conflicts to eliminate its armed opponents chiefly in fake encounters, yet at the same time new areas of political consolidation are emerging in Assam, with the narrow defining parameters of ethnic-identity politics gradually yielding space to more inclusive class-based organizations especially in areas where the fruits of development are virtually unknown. An instance of this has been the gradual consolidation of the Maoist organization in certain areas of Assam.[11] The government, panicky over the possibility that the vacuum caused by the ULFA's decline, might be filled up by the Maoists with their appeal which goes beyond ethnic allegiances, has embarked on a policy of elimination.[12] A direct fallout of the ethnic identity struggles had been the marginalization of class-based organizations and a blanket rejection of all those who called for united struggle of the people overriding ethnic divisions. The process which began with the Assamese middle class's attempts to carve out a homogeneous homeland for themselves reached its culmination point during the Assam Movement (1979–85) on the foreign nationals' issue. Taking

their cue from the AASU and other regional outfits of Assam, other communities/groups too started mobilizing themselves on ethnic lines. The AASU–All *Assam* Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP)-led movement had opened the Pandora's box of ethnic assertions and exclusivist politics became the rule of the day. This had an immediate negative impact on the trade union and peasant movements of the state. Assam has a long history of peasant struggle and this continued till after the first decades of independence. Similarly, the trade union movement stretched to the immediate pre-independence days,[13] and continued to exert a strong influence in the years following independence. But, the rise of ethnic politics from the 1970s seemed to change all this. Concomitant to the rise of ethnic politics in the region, splits in the trade union and peasant movements took place and attempts were made to organize the workers and peasants along linguistic and ethnic categories. Today, with growing disillusionment with fragmentary spaces created by ethnic politics, the stage seems to be set for the return of more inclusive and united democratic struggles. This is reflected in the sustained popular protests against the large dams and peasants' land rights led by the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) which has succeeded in breaking the monopoly of ethnic organizations in mobilizing the masses. The course and content of militant politics in Assam will largely depend on how the government deals with peaceful forms of democratic protest.

Notes

1. Several definitions have been put forward to define who is an Assamese and the issue has been raised in contemporary Legislative Assembly debates. But none of these definitions have been found to be acceptable. Hence, the debate on Assamese identity continues. The very plurality and heterogeneity of the Assamese national identity makes it almost impossible to come out with a viable definition.

2. This stands out in sharp contrast to the process in which the Naga nationality has emerged since independence by the coming together of the different tribes to fight on a common platform for the 'Naga way of life'.

3. Not to speak of regional organizations like the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, the idea of Swadhin Asom found favour even among a section of Assamese Congressmen.

4. In a booklet entitled *Asombasi Purbabangia Janagonoloi* ('To the People from East Bengal settled in Assam'), July 1992, the ULFA stated that the

migrants had now become an integral part of the Assamese nation which itself is made up of a mix of nationalities. In the same document, the ULFA virtually disowned the Assam Movement. But in recent months, the ULFA seems to have gone back on this stand and has been once again emphasizing the demographic threat to the Assamese nationality.

5. The ULFA had suggested that the ethnic communities should stop insisting on their identities and detribalize themselves so as to join the common struggle against the Indian colonizers. This did not go down well with the ethnic groups.

6. This is revealed in the issues relating to the Assamese nationality, including constitutional safeguards for the Assamese people that the ULFA has raised in its negotiations with the Government of India.

7. During the first five years of its existence, the ULFA gunned down more than a 100 people, the majority of them being Assamese. During a later period, it targeted certain linguistic groups which it described as 'agents' of the Indian colonial state and this included Bihari migrant labourers. The killing of the social activist Sanjoy Ghose in July 1997 led to wide-scale civil-society protests against the ULFA. The bomb blast at Dhemaji on Independence Day, 2004 which claimed the lives of as many as 13 school children, marked the culmination of the ULFA's terrorist activities and hugely eroded the organization's credibility and support base. Though the ULFA chairman has apologized for the 'errors' of his organization, yet there is substantial public opinion in the state which believes that the ULFA leaders should be brought to justice.

8. The first major split in the organization occurred in 1992 when a section of top-ranking leaders quit the ULFA and opted for greater autonomy within the Indian Union.

9. Held in April 2012.

10. There have been consistent demands from civil society that the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) be removed form the north-east. In keeping with the Prime Minister's assurance that a 'more human law' would take the place of the AFSPA, the Jeevan Reddy Committee was set up by the Central Government. It unequivocally recommended repeal of the AFSPA. But the report was not even placed in Parliament and government policy in the region continues to be dictated almost entirely by those at the helm of the security forces.

11. Maoists have reportedly made inroads in the extremely undeveloped Sadiya district bordering Arunachal Pradesh and among the tea garden tribes of upper Assam.

12. In one of the earliest cases of gunning down of Maoists, four Assamese young men in their 20s were gunned down in a fake encounter

on 9 May 2012 at Borgora-Deopani Nepali Gaon under the Sadiya police station in upper Assam.

13. One of the most successful strikes was carried out by the workers of the Assam Oil Company at Digboi on April 1939. The strike, which was brutally suppressed, received support throughout the state with several leading Congressmen openly expressing their solidarity with the workers.

II Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam*

This paper is a brief attempt at tracing the transformation that has been taking place within the Assamese community and how certain major demographic changes over the past hundred years and more have today reached a stage where significant alterations are bound to take place in the overall composition and cultural content of the Assamese population. Assam has rightly been called the melting pot of diverse cultural streams, the Indo–Aryan and the Austro–Mongoloid being the central ones. Assamese intellectuals point out to the 'liberal outlook' of the Assamese people and their capacity to take within their fold people of varying cultural and linguistic hues. The most common example of the region's accommodative power that is referred to by scholars is that of the 'Assamization' of the Ahoms who came from upper Burma, bringing with them a religion and culture distinctively their own. They ruled Assam for 600 years (1228–1818), shaped the course of Assamese national identity, and gave the state its present name.

The debate over the question of the Assamese identity stretches back to more than a century, it having acquired new dimensions in the years immediately preceding the Partition and freedom from colonial rule. The answer to the question as to who is an Assamese opens up so many

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possibilities today that it has become necessary to attempt a historical survey and analysis of the rather contentious issue of Assamese identity. Opinions regarding Assamese identity today range from those who subscribe to the view that there is no such Assamese identity at all to those who still continue to claim that such an identity is not restricted only to the native speakers of the Assamese language but embraces all those who come within the broader fold of Assamese culture, and that the process of Assamese nationality formation is still not complete. While it is true that over the past few decades several segments of people who were long thought to be part of the wider Assamese identity have asserted their separate identity and even gone to the extent of denying their Assamese credentials, yet the fact remains that the past 100 years or so have been witness to a major process of transformation of the Assamese identity. One of the main reasons for this has been the major changes that have occurred in the demographic scenario of the region leading to significant alterations in the overall composition and cultural content of the Assamese population. The indigenous Assamese fear of losing their identity must be viewed not just as yet another case of being outnumbered in their own homeland but as one closely linked with the widening of the sociocultural base of the Assamese community itself to include large sections of people who belong to other linguistic groups but who, for reasons political or otherwise, are today opting to call themselves Assamese. This has initiated a process of major transformation in the Assamese identity, which in turn is bound to affect the taproots of Assamese language and culture. In the course of our discussion, an attempt would be made to historically trace the manner in which this transformation has been taking place.

Migration of people into Assam, both from the Indian subcontinent as well as from countries lying to its east, has been going on for centuries. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the details of such migrations. But, it may be safely concluded that what is today known as the 'Assamese' or the '*Asamiya*' community of people, is the outcome of a process of aryanization as well as to the rise and consolidation of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra Valley. It may be safely concluded that the idea of a composite Assamese *jati* or nationality took shape during the later part of the Ahom rule. This process which started during the reign of the Ahom King Suhummung (1497–1539), when the Kachari

and the Chutiya kingdoms were conquered, was further consolidated during the Muslim invasions from neighbouring Bengal in the first half of the sixteenth century (1532–3) when the people were brought under an Ahom or Assamese banner against the common enemy. Not only were the Ahoms successful in repelling the Muslim invasions but by the year 1534 they had freed the greater part of Kamrup and Kamata from Muslim occupation and 'extended their dominion right up to the Karatoya in Murshidabad in the west and almost to close proximity of Dacca' (Barpujari 1992, 141). During the rule of Pratap Singha (1603–41), the consolidation of the Assamese community was further speeded up because of the common fight against the Mughal incursions and encroachment of Assam territory. The struggle against the Mughals cemented the sense of national unity of the Assamese and national pride was enhanced by the defeat of the Mughal army led by Ram Singh in the Battle of Saraighat in March 1671. The protracted conflict between the Ahoms and the Mughals consolidated the feeling of Assamese oneness, which was initiated by Suhummung who brought the Kacharis, the Chutiyas, and the Bhuyans within the ambit of the Ahom kingdom. The Ahom attitude of accommodativeness towards the different ethnic groups and the absence of caste prejudices made it easier for the latter to come within the Ahom fold (Bhuyan 1974, 48) and a broader Assamese identity had emerged.

Prior to the advent of the Ahoms, the western part of the country (referred to as 'Lower Assam' by the British) was generally known as 'Kamarupa', with Pragjyotishpura (present-day Guwahati) as the capital; the eastern part (referred to as 'Upper Assam' by the British) consisted of several tribal kingdoms and principalities. According to some historians, during the early part of Ahom rule, Upper Assam was known as Ahom country and Lower Assam as the land of the '*Dhekeris*'. While the people of western or Lower Assam were usually referred to as the Dhekeris by the Ahoms, they in turn, used to distinguish communities like the Koches and the Keots inhabiting eastern or Upper Assam from those of their own by terming them as 'Ahom Koch' or 'Ahom Keot' (Baruah 1972, 10). It was only after the Ahoms consolidated their rule over greater part of the Brahmaputra Valley that the country came to be known as '*Asom*'—clearly a derivation from the word 'Ahom'. Even in Sankardeva's time, the word Asom often meant the Ahoms (Baruah

1972, 110). In Shihabuddin Talish's account of Assam too, the term Assamese referred generally to the Ahoms (Gait 1963 edn., 144). In his account, Shihabuddin says that 'the original inhabitants of the country are of two races, the Assamese and the Kolita's (Gait, 151). Apparently distinguishing the Ahom soldiers from the rest of the army of the Ahom king consisting of non-Ahom Assamese, Mussalmans and others, Talish writes: '... A very small number of their soldiers often checkmate thousands in battle. But those of their warriors and heroes who attack the enemy with sword and arrow and boldly pierce the enemy's ranks, belong to the race of genuine Assamese and these probably do not number more than 20,000 men' (Gait 1963, 152).

The adoption of the Hindu faith by the Ahom kings and the active patronage of Hinduism during the rule of Rudra Singha (1696–1714) and Siva Singha (1714–44) hastened the assimilation of many of the tribes into the Hindu fold. The idea of a composite Assamese identity made up of the caste-Hindus, the Ahoms, the plains-tribals, and the small section of Assamese Muslims began to emerge. Sankardeva's (1449–1568) reformist Vaishnavism had already prepared the ground for bringing the plains tribals within the Hindu fold. Historians have noted that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries large segments of Bodo–Kacharis and other tribal groups embraced Hinduism (Guha 1991, 25). The neo-Vaishnava movement was largely responsible for bringing within the broader Assamese fold many of the tribal nationalities. The democratic content of the movement which popularized a monotheistic cult of bhakti and a congregational form of worship devoid of expensive rituals and which stressed the salvation of all, irrespective of birth, attracted large segments of tribal population to its fold. Commenting on the de-tribalizing effect of the neo-Vaishnavite movement, Amalendu Guha says:

> Even the Ahom kings who were initially hostile or indifferent to the movement during the sixteenth century, gradually felt the need for winning it over to its side. By the mid-seventeenth century we have an Ahom king embracing the faith. For neo-Vaishnavism was essentially a feudal ideology that was helping to detribalize a society in transition ... Like the developing feudalism, the neo-Vaishnavite ideology too had a de-tribalising role. Its emphasis on one humane deity in place of many, and on one common language as spoken by the majority in place of the several

> tribal languages and Sanskrit, was helpful to the growth of an integrated valley-wise feudal hierarchy with a sovereign at the apex (Guha 1991, 103; 123).

The great effect of neo-Vaishnavism on the nation-building process and the emergence of the Assamese identity was that 'this new faith spread rapidly, involving in due course a majority of the Assamese people' (Guha 1991, 100). The process of Sanskritization of the Ahom and tribal populations of the Brahmaputra Valley also saw a parallel change of a tribal pattern of economy to a peasant economy and the rise of the peasant castes.

While discussing the role of Mahapurusiya Vaishnavism in welding together the different tribal communities to form the greater Assamese nation, Hiren Gohain refers to the success of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism in attracting these communities to a broader and more tolerant culture. It was through this that 'the foundation of the modern Assamese nationality was laid'. The Vaishnava movement initiated the tribal communities into a developed means of production and gave them a broader world view in place of the narrowness of tribal life. Hence it succeeded in attracting the tribal communities to its fold.

> ... although the Mahapurusiya religious movement was indebted in some form or other to the tribal, Ahom, Koch, Brahmin and other communities, yet there is no doubt that its contribution to the process of the growth of Assamese life and culture was both original and great. By contributing to the material, intellectual, and emotional spheres, this movement helped in the growth of intimate bonds between the different segments of Assamese society. Hence, even those who are not Mahapurusiya by faith do feel deeply that in the context of their Assamese identity as revealed by their speech, behaviour, thought-pattern and values, there is a very great influence of the Mahapurusiya movement. (Gohain 1987, 11; translation mine)

Referring to the impact of the Vaishnava movement on Assamese society and how it helped shape the Assamese identity, Gohain observes: 'From the cultural point of view, the Vaishnava movement was the most important event in Assamese society. This was not only because of its widespread and deep influence. No other movement has been able to lift the Assamese people intellectually and morally as this movement has'. Thus, though there is almost no mention of the tribes in the writings of Sankardeva, yet it was his Mahapurusiya Vaishnava movement

which, in the course of time, laid the basis of the greater Assamese community. As such, Sankaradeva is seen as the 'father of the nation' (*jatir janak*) and his Vaishnava movement is considered as the primary and overriding cementing force of the Assamese nationality (Barman 114). It was, therefore, natural that the very concept of an Assamese identity would become inextricably linked with the philosophy, symbols and cultural practices of the Mahapurusiya faith.

By the end of the sixteenth century the Assamese, Ahom and tribal segments had come closer and become a part of the process of 'social and economic change (which) was accompanied by a gradual acceptance of Assamese—the dominant language of the valley' (Guha 1991, 101). The absorption of the Chutiya and Kachari kingdoms by the Ahoms, together with the Ahom–Koch interaction and the neo-Vaishnavite movement, all contributed in laying the foundation of Assamese identity. Though the first Muslim invasions of Assam are recorded to have taken place in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Barua 207, 216), yet it was during the mid-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that there were several major Muslim attacks which were successfully repulsed by the Ahom kings. The failure of the expeditions led by Nusrat Shah (1519–32) and Turbak and Hussain Khan (1531–4) resulted in the capture by the Ahoms of a large number of Muslims. Though it is commonly stated that this section of Muslims came to be known generally as the Moriyas or manufacturers of brass utensils, yet there were many others who belonged to higher ranks. In due course of time, this segment of Muslims got assimilated with the emerging Assamese nationality and came to be known as the Asamiya Mussalmans. The Ahom rulers gave positions of power and eminence to many of these Assamese Muslims and they also took active part in resisting successive Mughal attempts to overrun the region (Bhuyan 1974, 14). The assimilation of this section of Muslims into Assamese society was so complete that the historians who accompanied the Mughal expeditions into Assam noted that they were more Assamese than Muslim.

Thus, the demographic break-up of Assamese society on the eve of the British entry into the province may be said to have consisted of the different ethnic groups which were brought within the Hindu fold, the Ahoms, the caste Hindus, and the relatively small section of Assamese Muslims. For instance, in his social division of the Assamese people, the nineteenth-century writer, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, mentions

the following groups: Brahmins, Goswamis (Gosains), Ahoms, Baishyas, Mahanta or Mahajan, Kayasths, Daibaigyas, Kalitas, Keots, Koches, Chutias, and the Muslims known as Marias (Baruah 1976, 3). There are other historians who have included all the plains-tribes and the Kalitas, Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Keots, as well as those segments known as the scheduled castes today, within the umbrella connotation of 'Assamese'. British accounts, however, do not usually include the Assamese Muslims as part of the Assamese community. M'Cosh's is one of the few such instances where he mentions the Assamese Muslims specifically: 'The Natives of Assam chiefly consist of Hindoos, yet there is a large proportion of Mussalmen also; but these last are held in such low estimation, that the name "Assamese Mussalman" is a term of reproach' (M'Cosh 1986, 21). It was in the 1881 Census that the first major division of the population of the Brahmaputra Valley was made according to religion, caste, and tribe lines. The non-Muslim and non-Christian population of the valley was classified into three groups: (i) tribes uninfluenced by Hinduism, (ii) tribes in the process of conversion to Hinduism, and (iii) Hindu castes (Guha 1991, 131). As per this classification, the Assamese came under the subheading of 'Hindu Castes'. The 1881 Census lists a total population of Kacharis, Mech, Lalung, Hajong, and plains-Garos consisting of 3,96,000 as 'uninfluenced by Hinduism'. Only 82,000 Bodo–Kacharis consisting of Rabha, Madahi, Mahalia, Sarania, and Totila are shown as 'Bodo-Kachari Tribes in the process of conversion', whereas 59,000 people are recorded as 'Castes formed of converted Bodo-Kacharis and allied tribes' (mainly Chutiya). The Rajbansi/Koch population is shown as 3,36,000 while the 'Hindu Castes' which include the Kalita, Ahom (Tai-Ahom), Kaivarta, Dom (Nadiyal), Katani/Jugi, Brahmans, and Ganaks (Daivajna) make up some 7,91,000 people. Muslims account for 2,08,000 and the Miris 25,000. From this it appears that out of a total population of 22,49,000, the 'Hindu Castes' or the Assamese accounted for more than half of it. Amalendu Guha notes that of the total Brahmaputra Valley population of 22,49,185 as recorded in the 1881 census, some three lakhs were immigrants of recent origin (Guha 1991, 17). A large segment of this immigrant population belonged to the tea labourers who had been brought into Assam to meet the growing needs of the newly-opened tea gardens. In 1872, imported labour for tea gardens was estimated at 40,000, while the total number of recruits between 1871 and 1901

was more than 1,10,000 in Assam Proper (Guha 1991, 192–3). Muslims constituted 9.3 per cent of the Brahmaputra Valley population and a large portion of them belonged to the Goalpara district.

Although some early British travellers viewed the inhabitants of the plains as 'Assamese' and differentiated them from the neighbouring hill-tribes (Pemberton: 80–1), yet in most of the mid-nineteenth century British accounts, the term 'Hindu–Assamese' is commonly used to refer to the Assamese community. Dalton, for instance, while writing about those Kacharis who were yet to adopt permanent cultivation and retained their tribal customs, distinguishes them from the Hindu–Assamese population (Dalton 1872, 82). Thus, from these British accounts it appears that they seemed to view the Assamese identity more as a religio-social construct rather than a linguistic one. It may be observed in this connection that the process of the emergence of the Assamese community which had been going on under the Ahoms was transformed and given a new form with the consolidation of colonial power in the valley. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of the creation of new forms of knowledge of the colonized by the colonial state through institutions like the census and the map. In Assam too, the project of the census contributed to the process of creating and redefining new communities through a categorization that located people under clearly defined heads of language, religion, and tribe. It could be argued that this project of colonialism, discussed by several modern historians and anthropologists like Nicholas Dirks and Bernard Cohn, intervened in, and transformed the process of Assamization that had been initiated under the Ahom rule.

It is, however, interesting to note that common nineteenth and early twentieth century perceptions about the Assamese nationality were limited almost exclusively to only those people who lived in the Brahmaputra Valley. Writing in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the leading Assamese intellectual of the time, Gunabhiram Baruah (1837–94), berates his countrymen for being extremely insular in approach and xenophobic in their attitude towards their hill neighbours as well as the people of Bengal and beyond. Discussing the common Assamese perception of his time, Baruah writes: 'To the east, south and north of our country live the Khamti, Singhpho, Naga, Garo, Khasia, Bhut, Abor, and the other hill tribes. To our west is Bangal Desh—beyond Goalpara there is the Hadira Chowk or Bangal Haat.

We look upon the Bangals in exactly the same manner as we do the hill tribes'. Baruah concludes his article by stressing that education alone would help the Assamese to change their attitudes and to look upon the Bengalees and other outsiders as their brothers (Baruah 1885: 95–100). Obviously, the writer is referring to the Assamese–Hindu cultural mindset which had certain clearly defined ideas about purity and cleanliness. Even those hill people who spoke some form of Assamese (as amongst the Nagas and some Arunachali tribes) but were outside the well-defined Assamese cultural parameter were not generally accepted as Assamese.

The overall attitude of the Assamese towards the people of the hills may be said to have remained more or less the same in the succeeding decades, all the protestations about hills–plains unity notwithstanding. However, within the Brahmaputra Valley itself the assimilation of the plains-tribals into Assamese society was geared up for a variety of reasons. Primary among these was the growing peasant resistance to British rule in some parts of Lower Assam consisting of the western districts inhabited by the plains-tribals and the peasant uprisings of the closing decades of the nineteenth century. An influential section of the Assamese intelligentsia who stressed the polyethnic nature of Assamese society, at the same time felt that it was the Hindu, and particularly the Vaishnavite faith which served as the main cementing force of Assamese society. For instance, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, whose contribution towards the formation of a composite Assamese nationality stands unrivalled, in his essay entitled 'Assamese' discusses the process of formation of the Assamese nationality through the assimilation of the different linguistic and tribal groups as well as people from the rest of the subcontinent and then goes on to say:

> We have seen, therefore, that what we term as Assamese people and Assamese language is the result of the inter-mixing of many nationalities and peoples and languages. That is perhaps why the social structure in Assam is not as rigid as it is in other parts of India. But if we reflect a bit deeply, then we shall realise that although people from different regions have helped to form the Assamese language and the Assamese nationality, yet in Assam there is a cementing force which is absent in other regions. This cementing force is the *satras* which are responsible for spreading the Vaishanvite faith. These *satras* have succeeded in binding together the Assamese people with a common thread …That is why the core of

> the Assamese language is to be found in Sanskrit—the language through which Hinduism is spread and that is why Sanskrit continued to occupy the status of the mother language of Assamese and neither the Bodo, the Ahom nor any other Non-Aryan language could remove Assamese from its Sanskrit roots. (Bezbaroa: *Banhi*, 1831 Saka)

Thus, while the Vaishnavite faith and its religious institutions became closely identified with the Assamese identity and acted as a unifying force, there were several other factors which helped the consolidation of the Assamese community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The traditional *Raij Mels* or people's assemblies which were revived in the course of the peasant struggles against excessive taxation gave a fillip to Assamese nationalistic feelings. It is significant to note that the Phulaguri uprising of 1861 in the Nowgong district of Assam was led primarily by peasants belonging to the Lalung tribe and was participated in by all segments of the Assamese peasantry (Guha 1977, 6–7). Referring to the peasant struggle of the closing years of the nineteenth century, Amalendu Guha observes:

> The widespread peasant struggle, based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating landowners, made an impact on the contemporary Assamese society. The non-cultivating landowners—brahmins, mahantas and dolois, the traditional rural elite—apparently took the initiative and a leading role. But it was the poor peasantry and the other sections of the rural poor, including the artisans, who actually lent it a militant character. (Guha 1977, 54)

Two other factors that were instrumental in forging unity between the different segments of the Assamese society and in strengthening Assamese national consciousness were: (a) the struggle to regain the status of the Assamese language, and (b) the increasing pressure on cultivable land as a result of continued immigration of land-hungry peasants from neighbouring East Bengal which intensified from the first decades of the twentieth century. While the first struggle would be led primarily by the emerging Assamese middle class who would play an increasingly hegemonic role in Assamese society, the second factor affected both the tribal and non-tribal Assamese peasants who were being faced with growing land alienation.

Initially, the tribal and the non-tribal segments within the still emerging Assamese nationality came closer on the question of putting up a

common fight against the continued occupation of cultivable land by the immigrants and this was also reflected in the concern expressed by the Indian National Congress (INC) which, by the late 1920s, had replaced the Assam Association as the dominant sociopolitical organization of the region. But this process did not last long because of the changing political scenario and the failure of the dominant caste-Hindu Assamese leadership to initiate steps to prevent the dispossessment of the tribals from their land. All the rhetoric about tribal-non-tribal unity notwithstanding, the Assamese middle class's attempts to resolve the question of Assamese linguistic identity became the prime issue during the first half of the twentieth century. The struggle to ensure the linguistic status of the Assamese people took precedence over all other issues and the all-important question of tribal land alienation was put aside.

The reiteration of the polyethnic nature of the Assamese society on the one hand and the rather obsessive quest for a unilingual identity on the other seems to have been one of the major contradictions which the Assamese middle class has not been able to resolve till date. The struggle for the restoration of the status of the Assamese language is known history. But, the fallout of the struggle spilled over well into the 1970s and 1980s. The suspicion and mistrust between the Assamese and the Bengalis over the question of whether Assamese was to be accorded the status of the official language, has left a trail of bitterness in the history of Assamese–Bengali relationship in Assam. This struggle obviously had strong economic considerations, the struggle for jobs being one of the central issues.

The rivalry over language resulted in the average Assamese developing a deep-seated dislike for the Bengali-Hindu who was seen as a threat to Assamese identity and culture. The different stages in the fight for making Assamese the official language of the state were marked by bitterness and violence, with the ordinary Bengali-Hindu peasant and small trader bearing the brunt. Unlike the Bengali-Muslim, whose was primarily a struggle for survival and who was prepared to adopt a low key approach regarding his language and culture, the Bengali-Hindu who had once occupied an important position in the administrative set-up under British colonial rule, was not prepared to shed his distinct cultural identity. With increasing numbers of immigrant Bengali-speaking Muslims declaring Assamese to be their mother tongue, whether for

political or other considerations, it was but natural that in the struggle of the Assamese to secure a rightful place for their language and culture, they came to look upon the innocuous immigrant Muslim peasant as a friend and ally against the Bengali-Hindu who was generally viewed as a threat to Assamese identity. The espousal of the Bengali-Hindu cause and the often virulent anti-Assamese position adopted by a section of the powerful Calcutta press further helped to widen the schism between these two communities which, otherwise, had so much in common. The historical causes behind this attitude have been discussed in several contemporary social and literary histories of Assam.

It is important to note here that right from the days when a handful of Assamese college students set up the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Samiti in Calcutta in 1888, the growth of Assamese nationalism has been inextricably tied up with the question of official recognition of the Assamese language. Loyalty to the Assamese language came to be viewed as the sole criterion in establishing one's identity as an Assamese [this is still very much the case with most Assamese middle class-led organizations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS)]. Assamese nationalists seemed to have taken for granted that all other linguistic groups living in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys and in the hills of untruncated Assam would have to accept Assamese as the sole official language of the region. There seemed to have been a shift or movement from a position where the defining marks of Assamese tradition and culture made up of a mix of several ethnic streams were considered more important than the language itself, to a position where the Assamese language came to be seen as the primary and perhaps the sole cementing force of the different cultural streams which make up the Assamese community. Could we say that the idea of Assamese identity was gradually shifting from a position of 'multilingual uniculture' to one of 'unilingual multiculture'?

Political developments in the early part of the twentieth century such as the Partition of Bengal and the formation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, the formation of the Assam Chatra Sanmilan (1916), the Non-Cooperation Movement, and Assam's entry into Congress politics, pushed the Assamese middle class to a position of hegemony which they used to full measure to promote the language politics. The struggle for Assamese to secure its rightful place amongst the comity of Indian languages led by the Assamese middle class so

dominated the Assam scene that issues like large-scale immigration and the wide-scale dispossessment of the Assamese peasant from his land, particularly in tribal areas, received a backseat. The language movement, in some form or other, continued throughout the major part of the twentieth century, finding its climax in the 1960s and 1970s over the issue of official language and the medium of instruction in colleges and universities. This struggle for a unilingual Assam saw some of the worst forms of communal violence in the Brahmaputra Valley and drove a major wedge between the Assamese-speaking and the other linguistic groups of the state. A significant fallout of the language agitation was that while it finally alienated the hill tribes and sowed the seeds of distrust among several plains-tribe communities which were in the process of being assimilated into the broader Assamese nationality, a large section of Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrants now decided to return to Assamese as their mother tongue and to send their children to Assamese-medium schools. The stage was thus initiated for certain major transformations in the Assamese identity to take place.

During this entire period of Assam's pre-and post-independence history, the state's intellectual and political scene was so dominated by the language issue that all other issues were greatly overshadowed. Nevertheless, it was from the 1920s onwards that some degree of popular awareness seemed to be growing on the question of influx from neighbouring East Bengal and the gradual occupation by land-hungry immigrants of the tribal belts and blocks. The awareness amongst different segments of the Assamese community about the dangers posed by the changes in the demographic pattern and in the nature of land-holdings may be linked to the rather swift politicization of the masses during the Non-Cooperation Movement. Organizations like the Assam Sangrakshini Sabha founded by Ambikagiri Roychoudhury (later turned into the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha) as well as dozens of Krishak and Ryot Sabhas started voicing the demands of the peasants. The rise of political consciousness of the people was reflected in the articulation of regional demands which included the rights of the 'sons of the soil' and safeguards against unchecked and unlimited immigration from nearby provinces. As early as May 1920, Chandranath Sharma who was the virtual founder of the Congress organization in Assam and who was known for his radical views voiced his concern about the threat to the

Assamese identity from unchecked infiltration. In a letter to a friend, Sharma wrote: ' ... something has to be done by the Government regarding the foreign settlers. Otherwise, the country will have to face a very bad and miserable situation; our national identity will disappear' (Guha 1977, 121–2). Sharma is referring here to the national identity of the Assamese people as distinguished from pan-Indian nationalism. The 'foreign settlers' being referred to here are obviously the migrants from the other provinces of British India.

Assamese public opinion thus started to be increasingly agitated over the occupation of cultivable land by the Bengali-speaking immigrants who were predominantly Muslim. Discussing this, Amalendu Guha says:

> Landless immigrants from over-populated East Bengal—of them 85 per cent were Muslims—found land in Assam's water-logged, jungle-infested, riverine belt. Used to an amphibious mode of living and industrious, these immigrants came by rail, steamers and boats up the Brahmaputra to reclaim these malarial areas. All they wanted was land. From their riverine base, *they further pressed themselves forward in all directions in search of more loving space in the areas held by the autochthons. It was then that an open clash of interests began to take place.* (Guha 1977, 121) [emphasis mine]

Maulana Bhasani[1] and other leaders of the immigrant Muslim community started demanding the abolition of the Line System which had been introduced in 1920 to protect the land rights of the indigenous peoples (mainly plains-tribes) and, between just six years from 1930 to 1936, as many as 59 grazing, forest, and village reserves were thrown open in Nowgong district alone under the Colonization Scheme for settling the immigrants. The land-hungry immigrants did not appreciate the Assamese fears of losing their land and being outnumbered in their homeland. They were in search of a *lebensraum* and would not stop at anything and wanted the Line System to go. Till March 1933 in Nowgong district alone 47,636 acres of land had been given to immigrants (Guha 1977, 210). Census official C.S. Mullan's now oft-quoted observations in the 1931 Census Report where he predicted that if the immigration went on unchecked, the indigenous Assamese would be outnumbered in all but one or two upper Assam districts brought to the fore the threat to the Assamese identity and all segments of the Assamese community

came to be exercised over it. In the course of our presentation, we shall have occasion to refer to Mullan's observations and discuss their validity or otherwise in the context of post-independence Assam.

Even those historians who have been highly critical of Mullan's comments and of Assamese linguistic 'chauvinism', have admitted that major demographic changes did take place in Assam during the first decades of the twentieth century aided and abetted to a great extent by Muslim politicians of the state. Even Syed Muhammad Saadulla, who headed as many as five ministries in Assam during the period 1937–46 and who was known for his pro-immigrant policies, finally fell out with Maulana Bhasani on the issue of totally de-reserving the tribal belts and blocks in favour of the immigrants. Reacting to Bhasani's demand for the abolition of the Line System introduced by the British to protect tribal and indigenous land from being occupied by immigrants, Saadulla compared the situation in the Brahmaputra Valley to that arising out of unrestricted Jewish immigration into the Arab homeland. He declared that not to speak of tribals, even Assamese-Muslims were being driven out from newly reclaimed lands (Guha 1977, 282).

It was against such a background that the quest for Assamese identity took on a new urgency and Assamese intellectuals like Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and Jnananath Bora wrote about the need to defend the Assamese identity in an exclusive Assamese homeland. Ray Chaudhury and Chandranath Sarmah seemed to harbour similar apprehensions about the fate of the Assamese nationality though their views on other issues may have differed substantially. Ray Chaudhury's views on the Assamese identity vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state is summed up succinctly in his article 'Bharatiyar Swaraj Aru Asamiyar Swaraj' (*Chetana* 1920, 11). He believed that although in the fight against British rule, the different nationalities of the Indian subcontinent would have to submerge their identities temporarily for a common cause, yet once India gained independence, each nationality must be given the right to shape itself according to its own national consciousness (*Ambikagiri Raychaudhury Racanavali*, Asom Prakashan Parishad, 93). Thus, despite his being deeply involved in Congress politics, Ray Chaudhury had a distinct vision of an Assamese homeland where the different indigenous peoples would live in equality and harmony (*Ambikagiri Raychaudhury Racanavali*, 581). Ray Chaudhury saw no possibility of conflict between the collective needs of the Assamese people and those of the different

smaller linguistic groups living within the geographical boundary of Assam.

> In Assam too there is linguistic diversity made up of the Kachari, Khasi, Manipuri, Lushai, Naga, Garo, Bodo, Mikir, Abor, Dafla etc. But all these small indigenous languages have emerged from Assam's soil and have been nourished by her climate. Their linguistic interests are in no way tied with the interests of people belonging outside Assam, because these linguistic groups have no existence outside Assam. As a result there is no scope of conflict between the natural interests of these groups and the greater collective interest of the Asamese people. (*Ambikagiri Raychaudhury Racanavali,* 581; translation mine)

He insisted that any community or ethnic group which made Assam its home, including the migrants, were all Assamese (*Raychaudhury Racanavali,* 512). But Ray Chaudhury's dream of a harmonious existence of diverse ethnic groups making up the great Assamese nationality was, however, not fulfilled. Rather, given the nature of Ray Chaudhury's vision and the equations between the different nationalities in the Assam of his days, it was natural that Ray Chaudhury's dream could never be fulfilled. While it is true that even as the middle classes of these ethnic groups emerged in the post-independence period, new assertions were made and demands for autonomy raised (A.K. Baruah, 62), yet it must be seen that in Ray Chaudhury's idea of an Assamese identity and his vision of an Assamese homeland, there was little space for the hill peoples and no thought was given to questions related to power sharing or representation. His was an idealized picture of a greater Assam where the largest linguistic group, the Assamese, would live in harmony and peace with their neighbours. It is not clear how far this relationship would be based on equality. For, in his address at the Assam Muslim Students' Conference, Ray Chaudhury, while calling upon the immigrant Muslims to adopt the Assamese language expressed his unhappiness at the adoption of 'foreign manners and habits' by the hill people and their distancing themselves from the Assamese language and traditions (*Raychaudhury Racanavali,* 967). Like most of his compatriots, for all practical purposes, it appears that Raychoudhury's idea of Assamese identity and a homeland was essentially limited to the Brahmaputra Valley, its inhabitants, and the Assamese language. This is revealed in his appeal to his countrymen (Assamese) on the formation of the Asom Atmarakshi Bahini. Raychaudhury while cautioning them against the

designs of the Muslim League which had resulted in wide-scale riots in the East Bengal districts, declared:

> The Assamese have nowhere to go except Assam. The victims of the Noahkhali disturbances in Bengal are entering Assam. But if the Assamese fall prey to the miscreants, where will they go? We have nowhere to go but the hills. But even there, won't we lose our identity? What is the way out for the Assamese? Assam's land is the age-old inheritance of the Assamese people. The Assamese must rise as one to defend this national property. Otherwise there is no reprieve for the Assamese. There is no other place where the Assamese *jati can* survive. (*Raychoudhury Racanavali*, 533–44; translation mine)

While Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury talked of the identity of an Assamese *jati* within the Indian *mahajati*, Jnananath Bora envisaged a totally separate identity for his countrymen. In his articles, 'Kamrup Aru Bharatvarsha' ('Kamrup and India') and 'Asom Desh Bharatbarshar Bhitarat Thakiba Kiya?' ('Why Should Assam Stay in India?'), Bora insisted that Assam's regeneration would be possible only if the Assamese separated from India and asserted their independent status. Arguing against the growing Congress (and Indian) influence in Assam since 1920, Bora declared:

> Before this, the Assamese people had no idea of the Congress. The Assamese have *always* lived in a distinct country with its own distinct administration and never seen Assam as a part of India (*Bharatvarsha*). The course of our history is totally different from that of India's. India's history is not our history. Therefore, it is not all surprising that our people consider themselves to be outside India. Like Burma, Afghanistan, or, Thailand, Assam has always been a neighbouring country of India. (Jnananath Bora, *Awahon*, Vol. 10, Nos 3–4, 1938; 264; translation mine)

But, what is Bora's idea of the Assamese identity? In his case too it seems restricted to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley, although he says that the people of the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar areas should also be brought within 'independent Assam' because 'the pitiable plight of the authocthons like the Rajbanshis, the Meches, the Koch, Bodos and others is the result of their staying within India' (Jnananath Bora 1938, 469). Bora also talks of the needs of bringing the different tribal communities within the ambit of Assamese *jatiatabad*. It is interesting that Bora did not stress on the language factor. Rather, his emphasis was

on safeguarding the Assamese identity through political, economic, and cultural independence and he accused the Congress of weakening the Assamese jati by bringing in a divide between the Assamese-Muslim and the Assamese-Hindu (Jnananath Bora: *Awahan,* Vol. 8, No. 3, 1936, 262). For him, the question of Assamese identity was a historical question, which could not be resolved within the Indian nation-state. Though Jnananath Bora's views cannot be said to be representative of Assamese public opinion of his time, yet I have mentioned these because in the 1980s Bora's ideas gained a large degree of acceptability among a section of Assamese youth who took to arms to 'liberate' Assam from the 'colonial yoke' of India. Moreover, even in Bora's time, a substantial section of the Assamese intelligentsia seemed to sympathize with such ideas.

The question of an Assamese identity separate from that of India continued to be espoused by certain Assam Congress leaders too (Phukan, 67). Despite the large-scale participation of the Assamese people in the Non Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements, and the unquestioned popularity of the Congress and its leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel, yet there continued to be a large degree of sympathy for the cause of a Swadhin Asom where the Assamese identity would be safeguarded from 'foreigners'. Just a century of British rule was not sufficient to wipe out from the Assamese mind that till recently their country had been an independent one and the inheritor of a 600-year rule by the Ahoms, not to speak of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa and the glory of kings like Bhaskarvarman. But although the idea of a separate, independent Assam was a point of attraction amongst a section of the Assamese middle class, yet there was no clear idea as to who really made up the Assamese nationality. While some stressed on acceptance of the Assamese language and culture by all those who stayed in Assam, there were still others who were not prepared to accept to widen the parameter of the definition of 'Assamese'. For instance, Birinchi Kumar Baruah, one of the leading Assamese intellectuals and an authority on Assamese culture and literature, declared in the course of a public lecture that 'culturally, racially and linguistically, every non-Assamese is a foreigner in Assam'. Declaring that from very ancient times Assam never formed a part of India, Baruah went on to say that every foreigner who came and resided in Assam since the British occupation must be viewed as an alien, if Assam was to be saved from

the grip of foreigners (Phukan, 66). Now, such a definition seemed to be at odds even with the positions adopted by staunch Assamese nationalists like Ambikagiri Raychoudhury and others who were prepared to accept much later entrants into the Assamese fold, once they accepted Assamese language and culture.

II

Tribals and the Assamese Middle Class

It is necessary to note here that the Assamese middle-class leadership which had emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century, while making occasional emotive appeals for tribal/non-tribal unity within the broader Assamese community, did little to assuage tribal fears of being outnumbered and of being dispossessed of their land by immigrants. Moreover, little conscious efforts were made to psychologically accommodate and culturally integrate the 'non caste-Hindus' within the Assamese fold, while at the same time accepting the autonomous life-pattern of these people. Among the factors which were responsible for creating the tribal/non-tribal divide within Assamese society was the prevalence of the caste structure, however less rigid it was when compared to other parts of the subcontinent.

Assamization, which had been a natural process in the preceding centuries, gradually came to be resented by the small middle class that was also emerging amongst the different tribal communities of the state. Unlike the peasant resistance movements of the 1880s and 1890s when both the tribal and non-tribal segments of the Assamese population under the leadership of the rural elite had put up a common fight against the British administration (Sarkar 1990, 53), the Assamese middle class, which began emerging in the first part of the twentieth century and was a product of western education and modern entrepreneurship (Rajen Saikia, 163), displayed a large degree of indifference towards tribal sensibilities. Nevertheless, during the Congress-led struggle against British rule, the tribal/non-tribal divide in Assamese society remained partially submerged because of the fight against the common enemy. Assamese tribals contributed a lot towards the freedom struggle and many of them made the utmost sacrifice for the cause of independence. But several middle-class-led tribal organizations like the All Assam Plains Tribal

League and the Kachari Sanmelan expressed their reservations about caste-Hindu dominance within the Congress and favoured a sovereign status for Assam outside either India or Pakistan (Phukan, 59). The Ahom Association too made similar demands. Though none of these organizations had a proper mass base and could not effectively cut into the support base of the Congress amongst the Assamese plains-tribals and the Ahoms, yet they represented a point of view that would assume significance in the decades to follow. (Subsequent developments within Assamese society would show that the less Hinduized segments found it easier to move away from the Assamese parameter than, for instance, the largely Hinduized Ahoms who, despite their apprehensions about caste-Hindu dominance, considered themselves to be an inalienable part of the Assamese community [Phukan 54, 76].) Several Congress leaders including Gopinath Bardoloi and Chandranath Sarmah were aware of the need to assuage justified tribal fears, but this was not necessarily reflected in the different rungs of Assamese society and politics.

Just prior to independence, a major political development contributed a lot towards bringing the different peoples of the state together on a common platform. The Cabinet Mission Plan grouping Bengal and Assam together posed a serious threat not only to the identity of the Assamese people but also that of the hill peoples. The fear of being gifted away to Pakistan brought about a facade of unity among the Assamese and their neighbours from the hills. Within the Assamese community itself, the forces which stood for cohesion appeared strengthened. The threat to the region's identity posed by Jinnah and the Muslim League became a common binding factor, even as the spectre of the autochthons being outnumbered by Muslim immigrants assumed new dimensions. This is adequately reflected in the writings of almost all the Assamese intellectuals of the period. The Khasi leader J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, for instance, put up a spirited fight against the machinations of the Muslim League and spoke strongly of solidarity between the people of the hills and the plains of Assam (Bhuyan 1980, 384). Nichols-Roy seemed to have visualized a broader fraternity made up of both the plains and the hills people of undivided Assam and within which the hill people would enjoy enough autonomy to develop according to their own genius. In the Constituent Assembly debates he joined Bardoloi, Omeo Kumar Das, and Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, among others, in demanding a large measure of financial autonomy for Assam (*CAD* Vol.

VII, 227). But the Assamese middle class did not seem to share the idea of such a broad fraternity of the peoples of the northeastern region. It was too engrossed with the immediate issues facing the people of the Brahmaputra Valley in working out plans to defend its linguistic identity that it seemed to have had little time to work out the basis for a meaningful and workable fraternal relationship not only within the tribal communities of the Brahmaputra Valley but also with the people from the hills. Its espousal of the cause of Assamese linguistic identity over everything else stood in the way of working out and sharing such a vision. The Assamese middle class's perception of a post-independence Assam and the role to be played by the Assamese community was strictly limited to the Assamese-speaking people of the Brahmaputra Valley. This is best revealed in the Assam Congress's election appeal of 1946 which states: 'Unless the province of Assam be organised on the basis of the Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible' (Guha 1977, 302). Although as the most representative organization of the Assamese middle class, the Congress often claimed to speak on behalf of all the people of undivided Assam, in reality there was little space for the other nationalities within its scheme of things.

Gopinath Bardoloi's initiative in getting the Sixth Schedule incorporated into the Constitution of India is often cited as an example of the Assam Congress's liberal approach towards the aspirations of the tribal communities. But, even in asking for the protective clauses of the Sixth Schedule, Bardoloi and other Assamese leaders seemed to have been motivated by the hope that in the long run these tribal communities would ultimately merge with the greater Assamese nationality whose major constituent would be the Assamese-speaking segment. Though in the years immediately preceding independence many of the hill tribes of undivided Assam had made it clear that they would prefer an autonomous existence and a position of equality in relation to the Assamese-speaking people, the Assam Congress gave little thought to this aspect. However, it must be said of Bardoloi that, at a time when most of his Assamese colleagues in the Congress seemed quite unaware of the feelings of the other small nationalities in the then state of Assam, he had a vision of a composite Assam where the different tribal communities would have a friendly working relationship with the

Assamese. Yet, it was beyond him to realize at that point of time that the emerging middle-class leadership of these communities would not be satisfied merely with the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and would eventually demand their full share of political power.

The process initiated by Bardoloi came to a halt with his death in 1950. The new Congress leadership displayed a myopic vision and failed to reach out not only to the hill-tribes but also to the plains-tribes within the Assamese community. One of the main reasons for tribal disenchantment was the lack of development of their areas which remained backward as ever. Of course, the blame for the tardy development of the areas inhabited by the tribal population cannot be attributed solely to the state government-run primarily by the Assamese middle class. Central funds always came in a trickle and the national leadership of the Congress refused to accept Bardoloi's plea for treating Assam as a special case because of the extractive nature of the colonial economy which had drained the region of its rich natural resources without any plough back of capital. Moreover, Partition had severely affected the state's economy by virtually cutting off the entire northeastern region from the rest of the country and putting an end to the centuries-old trade with East Bengal. Added to Assam's woes were the thousands of refugees who had crossed over from newly-created East Pakistan. But, despite all these factors, whatever little development was taking place under the Assam government was being concentrated in the non-tribal areas and the consequent alienation of the Assamese tribal communities had begun.

But there were certain strong historical factors which contributed to the growing divide between the Assamese and the 'others'. The dropping of the Cabinet Mission proposals and the subsequent separation of the Bengali-speaking, Muslim-majority province of Sylhet by a referendum, set at rest, for the time being, Assamese fears of losing their identity. The role played by the Assamese leaders in galvanizing public opinion against the Grouping Proposals, the support received from Gandhi and the subsequent acceptance of Assam's demand by the vacillating all-India leadership of the Congress—all contributed towards infusing the Assamese community with a new-found sense of hegemony which made it increasingly insensitive to the demands of the smaller communities. One of the main reasons for the disenchantment

of the tribal people was their increasing alienation from their land and the overall lack of development of their areas which remained as backward as ever.

Underdevelopment, poverty, and the ever-increasing pressure on cultivable land from the immigrants were some of the major factors which pushed the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley to the wall. The Assamese middle class's insistence on a dominantly Assamese linguistic identity for the state and the support given to this by the ruling Congress Party, went a long way in alienating first, the hill tribes and then, the plains tribes. It was evident that the Assamese middle-class leadership, preoccupied as it was with the struggle to establish Assamese hegemony, had failed to respond to the growing sense of insecurity in the tribal mind. As a result, this sense of alienation came to be expressed in the growth of different tribal organizations which started demanding political power and social justice.

While the movements for autonomy and separate statehood caught the Assamese middle-class leadership somewhat unaware, it soon learnt to accept the truncation of the state, all the assertions about an undivided Assam with the people of the hills and the plains living in peace and harmony notwithstanding. But the initial Assamese reaction to the birth of plains-tribal organizations demanding their share of political power and social status was one of antagonism, with Assamese leaders and intellectuals continuing to assert that the plains tribes were an integral part of Assamese society. What they failed to see was that the process of assimilation of the plains tribes into Assamese society was being checked by a variety of socioeconomic, political, and historical factors.

It is true that during the Assam Movement (1979–85) on the foreign nationals' issue, the native Assamese speakers were supported throughout the Brahmaputra Valley by the Bodos, the Mishings, the Tiwas, the Rabhas, and other plains tribes. It is also true that several of the plains tribes may be said to have acquired a dual 'nationality' or identity in the sense that many of them considered themselves to be both tribal and Assamese. But, with the majority of the tribes, this sense of solidarity came under severe strain once the Assam Accord[16] was signed. They came to view the accord as a move intended to safeguard only the identity of the Assamese-speaking people, while totally ignoring the grave dangers posed to tribal identity chiefly because of land alienation.

Although Clause 10 stated that the accord would ensure 'that the relevant laws for prevention and encroachment of government land and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorised encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws', yet it did not take much time for the tribal leadership to realize that neither the Assam Movement leaders nor the Central government really meant business on this point. Moreover, the question of providing 'constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards ...to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people' (Clause 6) once again opened up the debate as to whether the tribal communities of the state, many of whom were part of the greater Assamese community, were really Assamese. The question of merely safeguarding the identity of the Assamese-speaking people of the state seemed unacceptable to the tribal communities, many of whom felt that they were more indigenous than the indigenous Assamese themselves. (The Census of 1951 had stated that 'the indigenous person of Assam means a person belonging to the state of Assam and speaking the Assamese language or any tribal dialect of Assam or in the case of Cachar, the language of the region'.) Since there was no mention in the Assam Accord of any safeguards to the tribal identity and way of life within the broader Assamese community, several of the state's tribal populations felt let down and were not willing to identify themselves as Assamese. The process of alienation of the plains tribes from the 'core' Assamese, which had been on for quite some time, was now reaching a state of culmination. This fact, however, was not accepted by the Assamese intelligentsia which continued to harp on the tribal/non-tribal synthesis in Assamese society.

It would perhaps be relevant to refer here to a collection of articles brought out by the ASS during the height of the Assam Movement. The collection entitled, *Assam and the Assamese Mind,* contains articles written by some of the leading Assamese intellectuals. For instance, the Jnanpith award-winning novelist, Birendrakumar Bhattacharya, while reflecting on the composition of the Assamese nationality, observes: 'The Assamese nationality is a heterogeneous community which includes tribal groups like the Rabhas, Bodos, the Tiwas, Mishings, Karbis and the Dimasas. Compared to these members of this composite nationality, the Bengalis and others are newcomers to the land. A large number of Nepalis from Nepal also came here in the last few

decades…' (Bhattacharyya, 1980, 83). Bhattacharyya makes no mention of the Assamese-Muslims or the tea-garden tribes. What is significant to note is that even at the time when this observation was being made, all the tribal communities named by the author as being part of the 'composite' Assamese, were actually demanding cultural and political autonomy in some form or other and that, within a short span of time, the Bodo demand for separate statehood would usher in one of the bloodiest periods in Assam's post-independence history.

In another article in the same collection, a noted Assamese Muslim scholar, Mohammad Taher, writes about the contribution of the Karbis, Mishings, Lalungs, Dimasas, Bodos, and Kacharis towards building the foundation of Assamese culture …

> on which was super-imposed the Aryan culture brought by the Hindu migrants in the past without giving rise to any social imbroglio. What gradually emerged in the process was certainly not a cross-breed of social systems, but a harmonious cultural entity, a colourful mosaic of diverse traditions and cultural traits, which was enriched further by fresh contributions in subsequent ages. (Taher, 59)

At another point Taher says:

> The socio-cultural personality of Assam has in fact evolved with contributions of all indigenous and immigrant peoples—who have made Assam the homeland and *have merged their separate identities into the common Assamese nationhood*…. Apart from providing the substructure of Assamese culture, the tribals have essentially been equal partners with others through the entire length of the history of Assam's growth and development. (Taher, 57–8; emphasis mine)

Durgeswar Doley, sociologist and leading intellectual of the Mishing community, refers to the inherent 'liberalism' of the Assamese people who are seen as a harmonious conglomeration of the tribal, the non-tribal, and the scheduled castes and who have never indulged in any 'fanatical activities'. According to Doley, 'the Assamese society is, and has always been, an open society…The process of assimilation and fusion has always been active and has embraced every ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious group' (Doley, 400). One could go on quoting from the other pieces in the collection to show that behind the almost obsessive refrain of a highly accommodative and liberal society, there lies

certain basic contradictions which most of the Assamese intellectuals are not prepared to face.

III

Neo-Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus, and Tea Tribes

Though none of the contributors to the above volume refer to the immigrant Muslim as being a part of the Assamese nationality, several of the writers, however, refer to the contribution of the Assamese-Muslims and the *'baganias'*. The 1980s, which highlighted the infiltration issue, rather paradoxically brought the immigrant Muslim to the centre stage of Assam's politics and culture. Over the years, large segments of the immigrant Muslim population of the state had been sending their children to Assamese-medium schools and returning Assamese as their mother tongue. This was particularly true of the immigrant populations inhabiting the riverine belts called the *'chars'*. And, once Assamese was made the official language of the state, the immigrant Muslim was quick to seize the opportunity of identifying himself with the Assamese-speaking majority. It is worth pointing out here that though the Bengali-Hindus in Assam often speak Assamese fluently and have made notable contributions to Assamese literature and the arts, yet they are seldom prepared to shed their linguistic identity. This was not the case with the immigrant Muslim. But, before taking up the complex and dominating issue of the assimilation of the Muslim immigrants into the Assamese community as the neo-Assamese, I think it would be relevant to discuss both the Bengali-Hindu and the tea tribal or the bagania in relation to the growing process of Assamese identity.

While the Bengali-speaking Muslim has assured for himself a berth in the Assamese community as neo-Assamese, the Bengali-Hindu's position vis-à-vis the Assamese community has gone through several ups and downs through a tortuous process. Long looked upon by the Assamese as a threat to their culturo-linguistic identity, the Bengali-Hindu's absorption into the Assamese community had begun during the middle period of Ahom rule. So much so, that many of the leading caste-Hindu Assamese families of today had not too distant Bengali

links and antecedents. There is no doubt that geographical factors did play a leading role in helping such a process of assimilation. But, the entire scenario of Assamese-Bengali-Hindu relationship swiftly changed with the coming of the British. Not only did this process of assimilation of Bengali Hindus into the Assamese community come to a halt even as communication routes improved and it became easier for them to retain links with their home region and also to nourish their own cultural and linguistic roots, but certain sections of the Bengali-Hindu middle-class leadership attempted to establish Bengali hegemony in the state and was supported in this by a section of the intelligentsia of Bengal. The replacement of the Assamese language by Bengali in the early years of British rule, the struggle for the restoration of the status of the Assamese language led by Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and strongly supported by the American Baptists as well as by Bengali scholars like R.C. Dutt, the competition for jobs between the well-developed and well-entrenched Bengali middle class and its newly emerging Assamese counterpart, the belligerent stance adopted against the Assamese language by a section of the Bengali Hindus in the Brahmaputra Valley and the support they received from a largely-partisan Calcutta press, as reflected in the debate on the pages of *Mrinmoyee*, *Bharati and Prabasi*, are but a few of the well-known historical reasons for the antagonism that has been existing between these two communities—an antagonism that seems to have largely shaped Assam and Assamese politics in the decades immediately preceding and following independence. Assamese antagonism was often propelled by the fact that the Bengali lifestyle came to exert an important influence on the Assamese middle-class and this was seen by Assamese sociocultural organizations as a threat to the Assamese identity. Thus, in many ways the question of Assamese identity got linked up with the struggle to disprove the contention being made by a section of Bengali intellectuals that Assamese was, in fact, a dialect of the Bengali language.

Though the Assamese quest for a more or less homogeneous homeland in the Brahmaputra Valley seemed to be fulfilled, at least for the time being, with the separation of the district of Sylhet from Assam, yet Partition brought in a flow of several lakhs of Bengali-Hindu refugees into the state. This large-scale migration resulted in Bengali-Hindu enclaves coming up in several areas of the Brahmaputra Valley where linguistic and cultural exclusiveness played a major role (U. Misra

in Abbi, ed. 1984). Interestingly, the first major difference of opinion between Assam and the Central government occurred over the question of settling the refugees from the newly-created East Pakistan in the state. Bengali-Hindu kept growing till it reached its climax during the agitation for making Assamese the official language of the state. In recent years, however, there seems to have been a positive reduction in the Assamese-Bengali Hindu divide, with Bengalis in the Brahmaputra Valley having accepted the status of the Assamese language and making serious attempts to adjust themselves to the majority community. Like the immigrant Muslims, Bengali-Hindu peasants too in many areas send their children to Assamese-medium schools, although they would not surely prefer to return to Assamese as their mother tongue. But, with new generations of Bengalis being increasingly educated in Assamese-medium schools, earlier antagonisms are bound to disappear, though culturally the former appears certain of maintaining its distinct linguistic identity.

The case of the tea-garden tribes is, however, quite different. After having being confined to an isolated existence for more than a century, this community of people has been increasingly identifying themselves with the Assamese in the recent past. Till quite some time after independence, the indigenous Assamese had seldom considered the tea-garden community (and this too has emerged with the coming together of heterogeneous groups) as a part of the broader Assamese identity and had accepted its peripheral existence. Differing Assamese middle-class perceptions about the tea-garden workers had become quite clear in the closing decades of the nineteenth century when the Assamese journal *Mau* featured an interesting debate in which several leading Assamese intellectuals participated. This debate centred on the issue of the ill-treatment of the tea workers by their British employers. The very first issue of *Mau* carried an article by Bolinarayan Bora where he attacked the Bengali intellectuals for painting an exaggerated picture of the sufferings and plight of the 'coolies'. Comparing the 'favourable' condition of the coolies in relation to the average Assamese peasant, the author tries to dismiss all allegations of exploitation of the tea tribes by the plantation owners. When Lakshminath Bezbaroa, on behalf of the Assamese students of Calcutta, wrote a letter of protest to the editor of *Mau*, the latter while refuting Bezbaroa's arguments, wrote as follows:

> Bezbaroa stays in Calcutta. He perhaps does not know the pitiable condition of the villages in Assam affected by cholera. In some districts as many as one thousand persons are dying every month. Yet, will he believe that in the tea gardens there have been no such deaths? Nice houses, clean water and 'hospitals' have been provided to the coolies and these are surely not showpieces ... our people only know how to create a commotion over the condition of the tea-garden coolies. They don't care even a little bit for the condition of our own Assamese peasants which is ten times worse. We are not concerned about our own good; instead, we are obsessed about doing well to *others*. We enthusiastically support whatever the Bengali papers write and are least concerned about our own needs. We cannot come together to discuss and find means to improve the condition of the Assamese coolie, the Assamese peasant ... our patriotism is awakened only when the tea-garden sahib kicks the *Bengali coolie*. This only shows the fast downward slide of our country' (*Mau* Feb 1887: 81, 131-2; translation and emphasis mine).

Clearly for the editor of *Mau*, the tea tribes were the 'other' as far as the Assamese community was concerned. Although progressive Assamese opinion was represented by people like Bezbaroa, yet the tea-garden worker remained an outsider for the average Assamese for decades at a stretch. Moreover, during British rule, the tea tribes were assiduously prevented from coming into meaningful contact with their Assamese neighbours. The winds of the national struggle were not allowed to touch this large segment of people. There is also no historical evidence to suggest that the Assamese tea planters behaved liberally with the tea workers. Their attitude and approach towards this depraved section of people was more or less the same as that of the Britishers. They took full advantage of the repressive laws enacted by the British to keep their hold over the tea workers. It was only after independence, that the first stirrings of change took place with the beginning of trade-union activity and the subsequent introduction of some degree of social legislation under the initiative of Congress leaders like Omeo Kumar Das.

It is only in recent years that there has been a marked change in the Assamese perceptions about the tea garden community. This change in attitude has partly been the result of the spread of a more liberal and accommodative spirit among the educated Assamese. But, the primary reason behind the changing attitude seems to have been once again the Assamese fear of being reduced to a minority in their own land. As

continued influx threatened to finally upset the delicate demographic balance in the state, Assamese middle-class opinion started welcoming the tea tribes as an integral part of the Assamese nationality. In a recent article on the contributions of the tea tribes towards Assamese language and literature, the author (an indigenous Assamese) makes this point quite when he says: '...we may conclude by saying that if the tea tribes are not accepted as Assamese, that is Assamese-speaking, in the census, then those indigenous people who consider themselves to be the "so called real Assamese" will become a minority in their own state' (Jan 2000). While strong historical factors have led to the change in the Assamese perception of the tea tribes leading to the 'other' being welcomed as an integral part of the Assamese community, the educated section of the tea tribes has also been making conscious attempts to identify itself with the Assamese. For instance, Ganesh Chandra Kurmi who is considered as one of the upcoming writers in Assamese from the tea community writes:

> The tea tribes are today fully assimilated in the Assamese national mainstream. They are Assamese to the core. They express their feelings and emotions in Assamese; they receive their education in Assamese and they have accepted Assamese culture heart and soul. In dress, food habits and behaviour, they have become Assamese. The tea worker today firmly believes in the dictum—"If Assam dies, we'll also die; if Assam lives, we will also live". (*Amar Asom*; translation mine)

While it is true that a sizable section of the tea tribes has psychologically become part of the Assamese nationality, yet the process of assimilation of these people into the Assamese mainstream is bound to take some time. Old prejudices and attitudes coupled with economic differences, not to speak of political machinations, are bound to act as hurdles in the path of such assimilation. Nevertheless, the integration of the baganias into the Assamese community has widened the parameters of Assamese identity and added a new dimension to it.

Compared to the Hindu-Bengali or even the tea tribes, the process of assimilation of the Bengali-speaking Muslim into the Assamese community has been both easier and faster because of certain historical reasons. This, despite the fact that the immigrant Muslim was farther removed from the indigenous Assamese culturally than the Bengali-Hindu or the tea tribal. But, as this section of Assamese-speaking immi-

grant Muslims started growing numerically, Assamese sociocultural organizations accepted them first as '*Na Asamiya*' or neo-Assamese and then as Assamese. For instance, leaders of the ASS, the state's premier socio-literary organization representing the Assamese-speaking people, have, in recent years, been emphasizing the need to accept the immigrant Muslim population as part and parcel of the Assamese society and have been critical of those who still refer to them as '*Mia*' or '*Na Asamiya Mussalman*'. The president of the 1996 session of the ASS went to the extent of declaring that the immigrant-turned-Assamese was more patriotic in the matter of Assamese linguistic-nationalism because, unlike many of the so-called 'core Assamese' with surnames like Bora and Saikia who send their wards to English-medium schools, the immigrants believe in educating their children in the Assamese tongue. Conscious efforts on the part of Assamese intellectuals were now aimed at drawing a dividing line between those immigrants who have come and made Assam their home, accepting the Assamese language and culture, and those who have come after March 1971—the cut-off date given in the Assam Accord. Soon, this cut-off date would cease to hold any significance. The Assamese were grateful to the immigrant Muslim for returning to Assamese as the mother tongue, thereby ensuring the majority status of the Assamese language and defeating the 'machinations' of the Bengali-Hindu to reduce Assam into a bilingual state. This, notwithstanding the fact that, for all practical purposes, Assam today is a bilingual state with Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley and Bengali in the Barak Valley. In such a context, the neo-Assamese immigrant Muslim also did not take long to realize his importance as a balancing force in the state's delicate sociopolitical scene and he strongly put forth his case for acceptance into the Assamese nationality. What is of interest is that while, on the one hand, the struggle to make Assamese the official language (1960) and later the medium of instruction at the college/university level (1972) alienated the tribal populations of both the hills and the plains and led to major cleavages in Assamese society, on the other hand, it drew the immigrant Muslim population closer to the Assamese fold.

As long as the Assamese language remained the vehicle of expression of a popular culture embracing different communities—as it was from the fifteenth to the early part of the twentieth centuries—accommodation was the keynote as far as the core Assamese and the tribal segments

were concerned. But once the official stamp was put on the Assamese language, it became an instrument of exclusiveness by determining certain specific cultural parameters. It was in this newly-emerging scenario, when state sanction to a particular language triggered off certain radical alignments among the different communities of the region, that the immigrant Muslim emerged as one of the major pillars of Assamese linguistic nationalism. This in turn, was bound to affect in the long run, the equations of the Assamese-Muslim vis-à-vis Assamese society.

Though compared to many other parts of the subcontinent, the Hindu–Muslim equation in Assamese society has generally been marked by a large degree of accommodativeness and mutual regard, yet it would be a simplification to state that there has never been any period of tension between the two. Just as the Assamese-Hindu, whose tradition and culture form the bedrock of Assamese society enriched as it is by the tribal and Muslim contributions, would love to claim that his is a liberal society where no particular religious-cultural trend is the dominant one, similarly the Assamese-Muslim has prided himself over the fact that he has always considered himself first an Assamese and then a Muslim. But just as the Assamese-Hindu (which includes a large segment of plains-tribal people) cannot claim that his is a record totally untarred by communal positionings, similarly the Assamese-Muslim too cannot say that he has always been above communal considerations whenever issues of nationality were at stake. Yet it goes to the credit of Assamese society that on matters of loyalty to the community, the Assamese-Muslim and the Assamese-Hindu often went together. While it is true that several leading Assamese-Muslims were drawn into the politics of the Muslim League and supported the demand for a Pakistan which would include Assam, yet the provincial Muslim League drew its support mainly from the immigrant Muslim population of the state. While it is also true that Syed Muhammad Saadulla, who was responsible for actively encouraging influx of Muslim peasants from then East Bengal—prompting Wavell to say that Saadulla's policy in the 1930s of 'Grow More Food' was in actuality one of 'Grow More Muslims'—yet it was another Assamese-Muslim, Mohammad Tayebulla who led the Congress in Assam during the tumultous pre-Partition days and who consistently opposed tooth and nail the politics of the Muslim League. Tayebulla's opposition to League politics was so total that he fell out with Bardoloi when the latter reached an agreement with the

Muslim League in March 1945 as a result of which the fifth Saadulla ministry was formed in which practically all the non-Muslim members were Congress nominees, though the Congress itself did not accept any office. Immediately after his release from prison on 27 March 1945, Tayebulla issued a statement in his capacity as the president of the Assam Congress, opposing the tripartite agreement and said that Bardoloi did not have the right to use the Congress's name in coming to an agreement with war-time collaborators like Saadulla (Guha 1977, 290).[3] It was Tayeb Ullah who headed the Congress in Assam during those crucial days when the entire state was mobilized to oppose the grouping scheme under the Cabinet Mission Plan.

It may be said, therefore, that on the whole, the general trend among the Assamese-Muslims has always been one of trying to integrate themselves with the Assamese community in such a manner that culturally they have become one of its important segments. Politically too, the Assamese-Muslim has often distanced himself from the general run of Muslim politics in the state. For instance, Amalendu Guha refers to government intelligence reports to show that Assamese-speaking Muslims responded poorly to the call given by the provincial Muslim League to observe 3 January 1947 as 'black flag day' in protest against evictions of immigrant settlers from grazing and forest reserves by the Bardoloi government (Guha 1977, 317).

Unlike many other regions of the Indian subcontinent, the cultural divide between the Assamese-Hindu and the Assamese-Muslim has never been particularly sharp. This had prompted Muslim travellers from other parts of the country to say that Assamese-Muslims were less Muslim and more Assamese. For example, Shihabuddin Talish who accompanied Mir Jumla during the Mughal invasion of Assam in 1662–3, stated thus: 'As for the Mussalmans who have been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing in Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with the Muslims' (Gait, 153).

Such a degree of assimilation was possible partly because of geographical factors and partly because of the demographic structure of Assamese society of the time. The first groups of Muslims came and settled in the region from the thirteenth century and this process con-

tinued till the fifteenth. They were easily assimilated within the broad cultural base of Assamese society built up of tribal folk traditions and the liberal brand of Hinduism deeply influenced by Srimanta Sankardeva's school of Vaishnavism. This is adequately reflected in the *zikirs* and *zaris* composed in Assamese by the seventeenth century Muslim saint, Shah Milan of Baghdad, who came to be known in Assam as Azan Fakir. The zikir and zari speak mainly of peace, harmony, and the transitory nature of human life (Malik 1958), and seem to be influenced by popular folk-music forms as well as the Vaishnava music of Assam. They form an integral part of the cultural mosaic of the Assamese people. Discussing the assimilation of the Muslims into Assamese society, two Assamese-Muslim social scientists have the following to say:

> the political assimilation of the Muslims in the state has considerable roots. A number of Muslim writers, poets and critics have made lasting contributions to the world of Assamese language and literature. To start with Azan Fakir, the process of assimilation of the Muslims had begun in the background of a tolerant and integrative Vaishnava movement launched by Sankardeva, the great saint and literary figure of Assam. Important personalities like Dr. Moidul Islam Bora, Mofizzuddin Ahmed Hazarika (whose *Gyan Malini* a collection of highly lyrical poems is a monumental work), Mohannad Piar and Syed Abdul Malik set new trends in the world of Assamese literature. A number of new and promising writers and poets like Syed Abdul Halim, Ismail Hussain and Khanir Ahmed (both Hussain and Ahmed hail from the immigrant Muslim community) have further strengthened the process of assimilation and consolidation of Muslim's quest for survival as a part of the greater Assamese community ... (Ahmed and Yasin 1997, 146–7)

This apparently ideal situation is bound to alter if the influx from Bangladesh continues unabated, thereby affecting the delicate balance within Assamese society. What needs to be noted is that the overall socioeconomic situation in the state seems to have reached a crisis point because of the changes wrought in the demographic pattern by the continuous migration of people from former East Bengal-East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh. Although the entire process of migration was initially linked with colonialism, it was soon to reach a saturation point because of the growing scarcity of cultivable land and the increasing pressure by immigrants on tribal belts and blocks and the reserve forest areas. Soon it was to become a simple struggle for cultivable land

between the immigrants and the authochthons. As pressure on land started mounting in the districts where the immigrants concentrated, communal tensions took a new turn. The alienation from land of the indigenous Asamiyas as well as the tribal people was bound to lead to major changes in the Assamese cultural set-up and, in the long run, affect the entire character and composition of the Assamese nationality itself. This situation is bound to be compounded by the fact that increasing numbers of immigrant Muslims have been returning themselves as Assamese. Referring to the difference between the immigrant Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley and those of the Barak Valley, on the matter of assimilation with the Assamese, Ahmed and Yasin make the following observation:

> ... the immigrant Muslims, who have come to Assam at different phases of the present century from East Bengal (now known as Bangladesh) and settled mostly in the 'char' (highland formed in river by deposit of silt) areas of Lower Assam, and the Muslims of the Barak Valley share a common cultural and linguistic heritage. But the distinctive feature of the immigrant Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley is that, although their mother-tongue is Bengali, they would like to be identified as Na-Asamiya or neo-Assamese. In the early part of the 1970s, they declared Assamese at the time of the census enumeration. Their children study in Assamese medium schools and they are trying to identify themselves as part of the greater Assamese society. In other words, except for the Muslims of the Barak valley, the Muslims of Assam consider themselves as an inseparable component of the Assamese society, and thus, have been accomplishing a difficult task of assimilation and identification with the socio-cultural life of Assam ... (Ahmed and Yasin, 144)

This is indeed an interesting example of a particular community or section of people trying to shed its distinctive linguistic-cultural heritage and adopt a totally different group identity, and that too by a largely political decision of declaring themselves as Assamese. But if assimilation is part of a long-drawn historical process, then would it really be possible for these people to give up their linguistic-cultural heritage? And, more importantly, what would be the nature of the tensions that would naturally be generated in the process of this 'amalgamation', through a largely political decision, of two very different and distinct sociolinguistic groups? With the flow of immigrants from Bangladesh continuing, and more and more Bengali-speaking migrants in the

Brahmaputra Valley opting to declare themselves as Assamese, the assimilative power of the Assamese society guided by the integrative Vaishnavism of Sankardeva would be put to a severe test in the coming decades.

IV

New Equations

The continued migration of Bengali-speaking Muslims into Assam has created a crisis of identity not only among the Assamese-Hindu, but, interestingly, among the Assamese-Muslim as well. Though in earlier populist agitations like the one for making Assamese the state language, the Assamese-Muslims had played a significant role, yet it was during the anti-foreigners stir of 1979–85 that they felt somewhat alienated and insecure for the first time in the state's post-independence history. Nevertheless, large sections of Assamese-Muslims actively participated in the anti-foreigners stir or the Assam Movement and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) was led at a very crucial moment when all its top leaders were in prison, by Nurul Hussain who was then the AASU Vice President. During the agitation, there were several instances when Assamese-Muslims and Hindus expressed solidarity of purpose. Nevertheless, although the stated aim of the movement was to drive out foreign nationals—both Bengali-Muslims and Bengali-Hindus—from the region, yet the communal flare-ups in the different parts of the state made the Assamese-Muslim feel increasingly insecure.

In several districts of the state, especially in Lower Assam, immigrant pockets comprising both Hindus and Muslims were attacked and hundreds of people killed. The massacre at Nellie or the killings at Chapakhowa and Chapori where immigrant Muslims were the targets added to the growing sense of disillusionment among the Asamiya-Muslims (Hussain 1993, 127). Discussing this, Ahmed and Yasin write:

> The long Assam movement halted, undoubtedly, for the first time, the process of Muslims' assimilation and their identity with the greater Assamese society… not only Bengali-speaking immigrant Muslims were the soft targets of assault, intimidation and harassment, the indigenous Muslims and even well-known personalities … were not spared humiliation … Consequently, many of the immigrant Muslims who in

> 1971 had identified themselves with the Assamese society and language, expressed themselves openly, at a meeting at the Haji Musafirkhana at Guwahati on the eve of the 1991 Census, the futility of false pretensions of assimilative gestures and their efforts towards consolidation of their Assamese identity. While the vast majority of the immigrant Muslims, who have already gone far ahead in the process of Assamisation, adhered to their decision of 1971 in respect of their mother-tongue issue, an insignificant minority did declare Bengali as their mother tongue at the time of the 1991 census. (Ahmed and Yasin 148)

The authors of the article raise some significant points regarding the status of the Assamese vis-à-vis the immigrant Muslims in the following manner:

> The Muslims of Assam, being confronted with the identity crisis, are putting to themselves a few but extremely important questions having far-reaching implications. Unlike the Muslims of northern India, the Muslims of Assam have been trying to resolve their identity problem by actively participating in the state politics. Yet they often have to find an answer to disturbing questions: Who are they? Are those Muslims born and brought up in Assam and whose forefathers came to Assam in the thirteenth century, whose mother-tongue is Assamese, whose cultural foundation has been shaped by the folk-tradition of Assam, really Assamese or Muslims or both? Are the immigrant Muslims who too have accepted Assamese as their mother-tongue and recorded thus in 1971, whose children are taking education in Assamese-medium schools in their respective areas, whose new generation has produced a good number of Assamese poets, writers and intellectuals, really Assamese, Bengali or Muslims? Where do they stand? Shall they declare themselves as Assamese and consider (themselves), as a part of the mainstream Assamese but not recorded recognition by the mainstream? (Ahmed and Yasin 148)

While raising these points, the authors conclude that because of the present situation in Assam, a large segment of the Muslim population is being tempted to disown their Assamese cultural identity and adopt pan-Islamic positions. But the important point to note here is that the Assamese-Muslims, who have been an integral part of the Assamese society and who used to have only marginal social interaction with the immigrant Bengali-Muslims, are today being faced with a crisis of identity. A community, which has, through centuries, lived harmoniously with the other communities within the broader framework of

the Assamese nationality, is today being confronted by questions regarding its own identity. As long as the indigenous Assamese-Muslim or Asamiya-Mussalman constituted only a very small minority within the Assamese nationality, problems of identity did not really arise. However, it is only when a particular section of people within a broader community or nationality grows to a sizable number that it starts becoming aware of its identity issues. And this is exactly what seems to be happening to the Assamese-Muslim community at the present juncture. Today, it is coming to see itself not only as a segment of the greater Assamese nationality but also as part of a greater Muslim brotherhood represented by the other Muslims of the state. With more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese mainstream, the social divide that once existed between the indigenous Assamese-Muslim and the one-time Bengali-immigrant Muslim is bound to become thinner and thinner and a more cohesive Muslim identity will emerge. Already, the new generation of Assamese-Muslim intellectuals is talking in terms of proportional representation of Muslims in the matter of jobs and other services in the state. In this, they are not advocating the cause only of the indigenous Assamese-Muslim but that of all Muslims in general. This change in perspective has been clearly brought about by the alterations in the demographic pattern of Assamese society effected by the unabated influx of Bengali-speaking Muslims who, in the course of a few years, seek and gain entry into the Assamese fold. In the changed situation, the Assamese-Muslim would obviously come into greater contact with his religious brethren elsewhere and also increasingly come under the pressures of a broader Muslim society. In recent times the Assamese-Muslim has reacted sensitively to immigrant Muslims being loosely called 'Bangladeshis', and assertions have been made about the Assamese bona fides of those who have joined the Assamese mainstream. Assamese mainstream cultural organizations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS) too have sought to quell such reactions by terming all the neo-Assamese as 'Assamese' and doing away with the distinction between Assamese-Muslims (Asamiya Mussalman) and the neo-Assamese Muslim (Na–Asamiya, or *Pamua*, or *Abhibhasi Mussalman*).

The indigenous Assamese-Muslim is today faced with a rather serious crisis of identity. While some sections feel that belonging to the growing Muslim fraternity of the state would give the indigenous Assamese-

Muslim a more determining role in Assamese society, there are others who maintain that continued influx of Muslims of Bangladeshi origin is posing a challenge to their distinct identity as Asamiya-Mussalmans. In the face of the expansion of the parameters of the Assamese nationality to include the ever-growing numbers of Muslims of Bangladeshi origin, several influential sections of indigenous Assamese or Asamiya-Muslims have been organizing themselves under their own platforms,[3] and asserting their distinctness as a community from the neo-Assamese Muslims. The indigenous Assamese-Muslims have been demanding separate safeguards as Asamiya-Mussalmans and have expressed their apprehensions of losing their identity after being bracketed as Muslims and minorities like those of Bangladeshi origin. In a recent article by a leading Asamiya-Muslim, the author states as follows:

> Over the centuries the indigenous Assamese-Muslims have solidly established that they have been Assamese first while all other aspects have taken a backseat. Unfortunately, as of now clubbed together with the Muslims of Bangladeshi origin under the term 'minority' or simply 'Muslim', the indigenous Assamese Muslims are confronting the horrific reality of becoming non-entities in their own homeland ... So far as the other indigenous communities of the state are concerned, they are woefully in the same boat in the backdrop of the non-stop Bangladeshi influx and an open border. The burgeoning Bangladeshi-origin Muslim population is leading to a rapid transformation in the demographic scenario—a grave threat to all indigenous communities of the state.[4]

The author concludes his article by calling for a joint struggle by all the indigenous communities of the state for constitutional safeguards so that their rights as indigenous communities may be safeguarded. But the sentiments expressed in the article naturally face a growing challenge from the expanding parameters of the Muslim community of the state which today includes several lakhs of Muslims of Bangladeshi origin who are now accepted as Assamese or neo-Assamese Muslims. With more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese mainstream, the social divide that once existed between the indigenous Assamese Muslims and the one-time Bengali immigrant Muslim or neo-Assamese Muslim is bound to become thinner and thinner giving way to the emergence of a more cohesive Muslim identity. It, therefore, remains to be seen as to how far the indigenous Assamese-Muslim will be able to resist the appeal of a larger Muslim fraternity that is emerging in the

state and which has come to exercise a determining influence in the state's political scenario.

With the segment of immigrant Muslims in Assamese society registering a sharp rise, far-reaching culture changes are bound to follow the shift in the demographic balance. Unlike the Muslims of the earlier period who, for a variety of reasons, got assimilated within the Assamese cultural framework which was primarily an amalgam of Hindu and tribal traditions, beliefs, and practices, the substantially-large Muslim population of today cannot be expected to accept Assamese cultural icons and institutions as easily as they have accepted the Assamese language. For instance, the *namghar* or the community place of worship forms an integral part of Assamese society and is central to its socio-cultural and religious life. How far would the immigrant neo-Assamese be able to integrate themselves with the Assamese nationality and what sort of tensions would such a process generate? How far would the taproots of Assamese literature be affected by the assimilation process? How far would the adoption of Assamese by the immigrants affect the spoken and written varieties of the language? Would the future of the Assamese nationality with a distinct socio-cultural base of its own be ensured only if the numbers of Assamese speakers recorded in the census figures remain more or less constant? Or, would other socio-economic factors also count? This takes us to the important question as to whether language can be seen as the sole determining ingredient of the culture of a particular community or nationality? Wouldn't Assamese culture and society be enriched by a new consciousness, which would have a strong unislamic content? These questions are bound to arise whenever the assimilation of two culturally-diverse groups of people takes place because of certain historico-political factors.

Certain historians have all too often found fault with the observations of the census official, C.S. Mullan, who, in his report of 1931, had warned that if the influx of Bengali-Muslims continued in an unabated manner, then the future of the Assamese culture would be threatened more seriously than it was during the Burmese invasions of the early part of the nineteenth century:

> Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty-five years—an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter

> permanently the whole future of Assam and destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1830 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization—has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali immigrants from the districts of East Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh. (1931 Census Report, 51)

Mullan was referring to the grim possibility of one particular community or nationality being totally outnumbered by another through a demographic invasion, of the relatively small Assamese nationality being eventually swamped by the larger and more versatile Bengali-speaking migrants from East Bengal. What Mullan had failed to visualize was that, in the subsequent half-century following his census report, those very immigrants whom he had considered to be a threat to the Assamese identity, would, by taking a largely political decision of officially shedding their Bengali linguistic identity (while at the same time retaining their culturo-religious identity) and accepting Assamese as their 'mother-tongue', become an integral part of the Assamese linguistic community, thereby initiating a process of far-reaching culture changes affecting its very roots.

While predicting that the Assamese would be reduced to a minority throughout the state except in the district of Sibsagar, Mullan could not visualize that the adoption of the Assamese language by the immigrants would, while ensuring the majority status of the Assamese speaking people, enlarge the parameters of the Assamese identity itself. Mullan made his predictions on the basis of sets of two assumptions: (a) that the influx of Bengali Muslims would turn the Assamese into a minority within perhaps a span of some 30 years or so, and (b) that the Bengali-Muslims would continue to retain their identity in Assam. The first part of Mullan's prediction would have come true had the partition of the country not taken place and the district of Sylhet not got incorporated with Pakistan. Yet, the demographic changes in the 50 years after independence have been such that immigrants have succeeded in reducing the authochthons to a minority in several districts. The Bengali-Muslim immigrants who started returning Assamese as their mother tongue have however, proved his second assumption wrong. But as already stated earlier, it would be somewhat simplistic to see the assimilation of the neo-Assamese Muslim into the Assamese fold as a smooth affair. That the Bengali-Muslims started returning to

Assamese as their mother tongue was a trend which developed after independence when they knew that their very survival depended on their identification with the Assamese community (it was only later that they became aware of their political rights in an independent secular country). Those who see the Na-Asamiyas or neo-Assamese Muslims as an integral part of the Assamese community, which they no doubt are, should also not overlook the socio-cultural and religious differences which exist (however much one tends to downplay these) between the majority Hindus and the former. It would be simplistic to conclude that the cordiality and warmth which has marked the relationship between the large majority of Assamese-Hindus and the rather small indigenous Assamese-Muslim or Asamiya-Mussalman community would be continued in the case of the Assamese-Hindus and the Na-Asamiya Muslims. The latter constituting over 30 per cent of the state's population, would also be prone to functioning as a separate political force in the state, just as the Assamese-Hindus who have been providing the major taproots of Assamese culture and society, would be increasingly burdened by the fear of losing out to the Na-Asamiyas. This is clearly revealed in the opposite positions adopted by Assamese and neo-Assamese organizations on the sensitive issue of influx of foreigners (mainly Bengali Muslims and Hindus) into the state. Although the neo-Assamese Muslims have become an integral part of the Assamese community, yet they do not seem to be as exercised over the question of influx as the indigenous Assamese and the tribal communities. History bears out that while the latter have all along asked for measures to stop immigration (before 1947) and infiltration (after 1947), the former has been involved in the struggle to open up more and more of the reserved belts and blocks for the new settlers from East Bengal, East Pakistan, and the then Bangladesh. This, therefore, would continue to be one of the major contradictions as far as the Assamese identity is concerned.

Contemporary writing by immigrant Muslim scholars who have become so much a part of the Assamese nationality, have attempted to deal with some of these questions. For instance, while discussing the process of assimilation of the immigrant Muslims, columnist Abdul Khalek says that in the last two decades, all the newspapers that have been brought out by people of East-Bengal origin living in the interior areas of the state have been in Assamese. And, therefore, the question

of such a *janagusthi*, which have become one with the Assamese, giving up the Assamese language just does not arise. Monirul Hussain makes a similar point when he says:

> Even if they (the neo-Assamese) want to give up the Asamiya language out of provocation or frustration, they cannot do so now. They are now an absolutely inseparable part of the Asamiya nationality. This community along with the black-tribals, have given the most precious gift to the Asamiya nationality, that is, the dominant majority status of Asamiya language in their traditional homeland—the Brahmaputra Valley. (Hussain, 224)

Both Hussain and Khaled also refer to the point made by Assamese intellectuals that if the Assamese language is to be saved from extinction, then the number of Assamese speakers must be increased. Hussain, while referring to the claims of the neo-Assamese to membership of the Assamese nationality, comments thus:

> The elder generation of this community (neo-Assamese) is bi-lingual and the new generation is becoming unilingual—Asamiya. All the educational institutions established in their areas have been adopting the Asamiya language as the medium of instruction. Here, it would be pertinent to point out explicitly that in the near future, *this community will have a stronger claim than other relatively better-off sections of the Asamiya nationality as the real Asamiyas because they have been sending their children only to Asamiya medium schools*. On the contrary, the relatively better-off sections of the Asamiya nationality who claim to be the real Asamiyas, are increasingly sending their children to English medium schools which are mushrooming in the Brahmaputra Valley. (Hussain 1993: 223; emphasis mine)

But, Adbul Khalek does not fully agree about the unilingual status of the present generation of Na-Asamiyas and presents a different view regarding the question of complete assimilation when he writes:

> Many of the "Assamese" desire that these people of East Bengal origin who have given Assamese the status of a mother-tongue, should also converse amongst themselves in the Assamese language. There is, however, never any possibility of this hope of the "Assamese" being realized because a huge number of people cannot be expected to change their language in such a manner. Had they lived as separate groups scattered

> over different areas, then perhaps this could have been possible. (Khalek, *Amar Asom*; translation mine)

This adequately shows that the process of assimilation is never a simple one and that it involves different levels of complicacies. Contemporary writing has also been marked by a degree of remorse at the 'betrayal' of the Assamese cause by its middle class and a sense of satisfaction at the positive contributions to Assamese literature by the immigrant neo-Assamese who have made Assamese their 'second mother-tongue' and have reached the stage where they can express finer sensibilities in that language (Jatin Bargohain, *Amar Asom*; translation mine). Thus, the emergence of the Assamese-Muslim (made up of both the Asamiya-Muslim constituent and the Na-Asamiyas) as a major constituent of the Assamese nationality, is bound to bring about far-reaching changes in the culture and civilization of the Assamese people as a whole. For, while becoming a part of the Assamese nationality by returning to Assamese as their 'mother-tongue' during census enumerations and making full use of the Assamese language as a lever of acceptability, yet the questions relating to the immigrant's real mother tongue, cultural identity, and socio-religious taproots would take a long time to be resolved. These factors are bound to bring about a large degree of transformation in Assamese identity.

The newfound sense of confidence of the neo-Assamese cannot be discussed without taking into account the demographic changes that have occurred in the state over the past century and a half. But, even while allowing space for arguments which tend to prove that immigrations from neighbouring Bangladesh is not the sole cause of the demographic change and that there is no threat to the Assamese identity because the number of Assamese speakers has remained more or less steady since independence (Guha, 212–13; Hussain, 206–07), yet the fact remains that over the years, the Assamese-Hindu as well as plains-tribal communities are being gradually reduced to a minority in several districts of the state. This is naturally been accompanied by a substantial degree of land alienation among the indigenous Assamese in favour of the immigrants.[5] Though it is beyond the scope of this lecture to go into the actual causes of such an increase in the Muslim population of the state, yet it would certainly be in the interests of all sections of the Assamese society and particularly of the neo-Assamese Muslims to

resist further infiltration. For, further demographic changes could bring a halt to the process of assimilation of the neo-Assamese and trigger off a major identity crisis. As it is, the Asamiya identity is under great pressure from swift demographic changes and, once the saturation point is reached, a major crisis could result.

This demographic change has not only been adequately reflected in the electoral politics of the state but also in the policies and positionings of insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which have come out with documents addressed to the 'immigrant population of East Bengal origin in Assam' wherein the contributions of the latter have been praised and they have been described as an important segment of the Assamese nationality. Tracing the roots of migration from East Bengal into Assam, the ULFA document states that the migrants have now become a major part of the national life of the state. At a particular section, the document states:

> When we refer to the Assamese, instead of meaning the Assamese-speaking people we actually mean the different inter-mixture of tribal nationalities—those who are committed towards working for the good of Assam. The mixture of nationalities that is the Assamese today is, in reality, the result of immigration. We consider the immigrants from East Bengal to be a major part of the national life of the people of Assam. Our freedom struggle can never be successful without these people ... the masses who earn their living through hard physical labour can never be our enemies. (Sanjukta Mukti Bahini, *Pracar Patra* July 1992; translation mine)

Another portion of the document runs thus: 'The contribution of the people of East-Bengal origin towards increasing the state's economic output is indeed noteworthy. It is this community which produces the state's vegetables, mustard, sesame, and 82 per cent of the total jute. This is the main group of peasants who can produce plenty out of small areas of land' (*Pracar Patra*; translation mine). In the same booklet, the ULFA dismisses the Assam Movement on the foreigners' issue led by the AASU and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), as one based on populist sentiment and calls upon the people of Assam to struggle for their salvation along with the immigrants (*Pracar Patra*, 9). Thus, those very segments that were once considered a threat, are now viewed upon as a strength.

The quest for Assamese identity has indeed taken new and exciting turns. Whereas in the natural course of events, it would mainly have been the different plains-tribal communities of the Brahmaputra Valley (and maybe a few other tribes like the Karbis and the Dimasas as well) which would have finally become a part of the broader Assamese nationality, now it has been the once much-disliked immigrant Muslim who has succeeded in finding a major berth within the Assamese nationality. It seems to have been a quirk of history that Assamese over-zealousness in protecting their language and linguistic identity eventually led to an irredentism which went a long way in alienating the tribal communities, while at the same time opening its doors to that very section of people against whom the indigenous Assamese have been agitating for almost a century now. Moreover, the transformation that Assamese identity is undergoing because of the inclusion within its fold of the neo-Assamese Muslims, is bound to further alienate the plains tribes from the Assamese community. This is because of the tensions between the tribals and the neo-Assamese arising out of the progressive occupation over the years of tribal land by the immigrants-turned-Assamese. The attacks on Muslim settlements in Bodo areas in recent years and the present conflagration could be seen as an indication of a longer and intensive confrontation between the neo-Assamese and the plains-tribal communities. It would be interesting to see as to how and where the indigenous Assamese would place themselves in the event of a wider confrontation between the plains tribes (led for instance by the Bodos) and the neo-Assamese Muslims. Viewed as an integral part of the Assamese community, the latter would naturally expect to be supported by the broader Assamese community. This would add a new dimension to the indigenous neo-Assamese and Assamese plains-tribe equation in the state. Thus, it is significant that while, on the one hand, the parameters of the Assamese identity are expanding to include the immigrants, the tea tribes, and even the Nepalese, on the other, the alienation of the plains tribals seems complete. With more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese community, this alienation which is intricately related to the land issue, is bound to grow further. The indigenous Assamese still seem to be nourishing the illusion that the tribal content of their society is even today very central. The reality seems to be otherwise.

Notes

1. Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, better known as Maulana Bhasani, was born in a peasant family of East Bengal. He was involved in the Khilafat and Non Cooperation Movements and finally emerged as a leader of the Muslim peasants of East Bengal where he organized them to fight against feudal oppression. Soon he became influential among the Muslim immigrants in Assam and was elected a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937. Bhasani led the immigrant Muslims in a movement against the Line Sytem and demanded that belts and blocks reserved for the tribals be opened up for occupation. As the president of the provincial Muslim League, Bhasani had planned a series of marches in lower Assam in February 1947 against the Line System but the move fizzled out when the possibility of Assam becoming a part of the Indian Union became clear.

2. The six-year-old Assam Movement on the issue of illegal influx from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, which was spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union, culminated in the signing of an accord between the Government of India and the sponsors of the agitation.

3. There are, however, contradictory views about Tayebulla's opposition to Bardoloi's tactical move which is seen by many political analysts and historians as a right step aimed at safeguarding the interests of the people of the northeastern region.

4. The Sadou Asom Goria Moria Deshi Jatiya Parishad is one of such organizations fighting for the rights of indigenous Assamese-Muslims.

5. Talmizur Rahman, 'Assamese Muslims' Identity Crisis', *Assam Tribune*, 11 September 2010. Guwahati.

6. If one goes by Census figures, then the rise in the Muslim population (overwhelmingly Bengali-speaking to start with) in Assam has been quite sharp, although certain scholars have made consistent attempts to play down immigration figures (Hussain 1993, 216–20). The 2001 Census figures show that while the decadal growth rate of the Muslims in Assam during the period 1991–2001 was 29.35 per cent, that of the Hindus was 14.9 per cent. During the same period the Hindu population fell from 67 per cent in 1991 to 65 per cent in 2001, while that of the Muslims rose from 28.4 to 30.9 per cent. Thus the Muslim population rose from 28.4 per cent in 1951 to 30.9 per cent in 2001. Muslims today form a majority in the six districts of Dhubri (74.29 per cent), Goalpara (53.71 per cent), Barpeta (59.37 per cent), Nagaon (51 per cent), Karimganj (52.3 per cent), and Hailakandi (57.63 per cent), while in the Marigaon district they constitute almost 48 per cent of the population.

III Targeting the Innocent*

In the evening hours of 5 January 2007, United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) militants carried out simultaneous attacks on Bihari migrant brick-kiln workers and Hindi-speaking petty tradesmen in several parts of the state's upper Assam districts of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh. The modus operandi was similar in most cases. Small groups of well-armed militants, sometimes dressed in army fatigues, carried out swift attacks in the brick kilns of Duliajan, Jaipur, Doom Dooma and after mowing down the workers, quietly disappeared into the darkness. Similar death squads killed Bihari milkmen in the riverine islands in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts, while militants gunned down Hindi-speaking people in Longsual village in Tinsukia district. One of the worst outrages took place in the remote riverine island of Mushaldhari Chapori under Chapakhowa police station, where from the 18 cowherds who stayed there, 15 Biharis were separated and gunned down while the three Nepalis were left unharmed. The people initially mistook the armed men to be army regulars in search of ULFA militants. Similar attacks were carried out in a riverine island in Dibrugarh district where six milkmen were shot dead. Two days later migrant workers were attacked in Sivasagar and Golaghat districts as well. Unofficial estimates have put the death toll at 71, while government sources say 62 people have been killed. Clearly the ULFA had chosen the softest of targets to put its message across to the state and central governments that it still has the capacity to strike at will and make a mockery of the state's law and order.

A lot of undue significance seems to have been given to the fact that the attacks on the occurred barely within 24 hours of the union home secretary V. K. Duggal's January 5 statement at Guwahati that the national games would be held as per schedule, despite the ULFA's boycott call which he termed as 'not serious'. Also, that the killings coincided with the announcement of the results of the first phase of an opinion poll in the state's nine districts which overwhelmingly rejected

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the ULFA's call for a sovereign or 'Swadhin Asom'. The poll, which had been conducted by the Assam Public Works, an organisation floated by relatives of ULFA militants, was promptly rejected by the ULFA as the work of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of the government of India. However, to suggest that ULFA's action was a mere fallout of the government's decision to go ahead with the national games or a reaction to the rejection of its sovereignty demand, would be to overlook the fact that the attacks on the Hindi-speaking migrant workers, small shopkeepers and tradesmen were actually part of its well-planned out strategy of highlighting its thesis about Assam and the north-eastern region being increasingly 'colonised by the Indians', while at the same time proving that it still retains its capacity to strike at will, all the talk about the decimation in its strength and reduction of its support base notwithstanding. The manner in which the attacks on Hindi-speaking migrant workers were carried out in as many as five upper Assam districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Golaghat, and Dhemaji, suggest that the actions were part of a well-coordinated plan and disproves the government claim that the outfit's command structure is not functioning. The choice of soft targets mostly in remote and inaccessible areas some of which can be reached only by boat, the manner of the attacks and the quick disappearance of the culprits, all suggest that there is a definite pattern to the violence. In fact, much before the carnage took place, the ULFA had given enough indications that it was planning to do something that would grab national headlines and that the targeting of the Hindi-speaking people was very much on its cards. For instance, in September 2006, the ULFA commander, Paresh Baruah warned 'all Indians living in the north-east' that they would have to pay taxes to the outfit, while it expected the indigenous people to voluntarily come forward and aid it in its struggle for a sovereign Assam. This was followed in November, just after the blast in Guwahati which killed 14 Hindi-speaking people and injured over 50, by a statement from the ULFA chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, calling for a boycott of the national games on the plea that the games were being imposed on the Assamese by a 'colonial' India and that unless the political conflict between the Assamese people and the government of India was resolved, there was no question of Assam hosting the games. Rajkhowa added that the rights of the Assamese people were being usurped by the

Indians. The militant outfit insisted that if at all the games were to be held, then these should be rechristened as 'Asom Kriya Mahotsav'. This assumes significance in the light of ULFA's thesis that Assam is under the occupation of the 'colonial Indian forces.'

Although Dispur apparently put up a brave face and insisted that the games would be held on schedule, ULFA's boycott call was taken seriously by all quarters. While the state government made several appeals for á withdrawal of the boycott call, the Assam assembly too, in a rare gesture, passed a unanimous resolution appealing to the ULFA to reconsider its decision. The assemblyresolution was seen by many as an ill timed move, which gave a lot of credibility to the banned organisation. The ULFA, however, stuck to its boycott call and made its intention clear by carrying out a series of blasts in Guwahati and other places in end-December. This was followed up by an attack on "illegal migrants" from India in the December issue of the ULFA mouthpiece, Freedom. Declaring that 'illegal migrants' from the rest of India had threatened the very existence of the Assamese people by occupying the political and economic space of the region, the ULFA went on to say that before the illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal are detected and deported, those 'illegal migrants from India' must be expelled. Assam, the ULFA stated, was being turned into a 'mini-Rajasthan' and a 'mini-Bihar' by migrants and that the rights of the indigenous people were being seriously compromised. As if these were not signals enough that ULFA was planning a strike on the Hindi-speaking population of the state, barely a week or so before the 5–8 January killings, some arrested ULFA cadres in Dibrugarh and Sivasagar revealed that the outfit was frustrated at Delhi's seeming indifference to its (ULFA's) continued attacks on the security forces and its targeting of oil pipelines and that it was now planning to do 'something big' that would shake the country. But, instead of making any attempt to identify those pockets of Hindi-speaking people which could be the most vulnerable to militant attacks, Dispur decided to beef up the security of the Chief Minister and his colleagues and stepped up vigilance in the capital complex. When questioned about the failure of his government's intelligence network, the Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, admitted that though his administration could sense the threat to the Hindi-speaking people, his police force was inadequate to cover the remote and inaccessible areas where the

attacks took place. Earlier too, after the blasts at Fancy Bazar, Guwahati, in November 2006, the Chief Minister had declared that his government had failed to provide security of life and property to its citizens and cited inadequacy of police and security personnel as the prime cause behind the administration's inability to take pre-emptive action. A deep sense of resignation had then marked the Chief Minister's words and obviously the wrong message had gone to the ULFA that it had succeeded in shaking the confidence of the government. And that too at a time when it was under great pressure from the security forces and had lost several of its leading cadres particularly in upper Assam.

This is not the first time that Hindi-speaking people have been targeted by the ULFA in Assam. It was in October 2000 that the first major strike on Bihari labourers and petty tradesmen had taken place, with 15 people being shot dead in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts. Before that year came to a close, another 26 Hindi-speaking people had been mowed down in different parts of the state. The following two years saw the selective killing of Hindi-speaking small tradesmen, shopkeepers, and migrant workers. In 2003 as many as 100 Bihari people lost their lives in violent attacks that were sparked off in the state after the rape of a girl from the northeast and molestation of some women in one of the Guwahati-bound trains passing through Bihar. In most of these incidents that were largely confined to the upper Assam districts, the ULFA played a leading role. The public outcry that followed these killings led to a lull of sorts for the next two years, although the selective gunning down of Hindi-speaking businessmen continued. As 2006 drew to a close, a series of blasts took place in Guwahati and its suburbs and the targets were again mostly Hindi-speaking people, the worst attack being the blast that shook Fancy Bazar, Guwahati, in November 2006.

Judging by the consistency in the attacks carried out by the insurgent organization on the Hindi-speaking population of the state, it is clear that this is part of ULFA's attempt to divert the attention of the indigenous people from the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh and keep the focus on its thesis built around the issue of Indian colonization of the region. Its soft line towards illegal Bangladeshi migrants has led many observers to conclude that the killings of Hindi-speaking migrant workers have been aimed at replacing these with Bangladeshi ones. However, there seems to be no substantial data to prove this contention.

The ULFA's attacks on Hindi-speaking people have been running parallel to its programme of blowing up of oil pipelines, carrying out IED blasts in busy marketplaces of several towns and the targeting of vehicles carrying police and army personnel. It is to be noted that even when the peace talks between the People's Consultative Group (PCG) set up by the ULFA and the centre were underway, there was little lull in the violence. As per the South Asia Terrorism Portal, during the year 2006 a total of 86 people were killed in militancy-related violence and this included 48 civilians, 16 security personnel, and 22 militants. Therefore, it would be incorrect to suggest that the breakdown in the peace negotiations has mainly led to a resurgence of the violence. Actually, despite three rounds of discussion between the Centre and the PCG, the peace talks never really took off. Excepting for a brief lull in security operations and ULFA's response in the form of a 'restraint', there was no tangible change in the situation. This was because the ULFA has been consistently maintaining that the question of sovereignty must form the central plank of possible direct negotiations between the militant outfit and the Centre. It has also been insisting for the release of five of its jailed leaders and the whereabouts of its missing cadres during the Bhutan operation of 2003 to be made public before talks can begin. The question therefore arises: Why did the ULFA set up the People's Consultative Committee to negotiate with New Delhi when it was at no stage prepared to compromise on the sovereignty demand? The PCG was flawed right from the beginning. At no stage did the PCG succeed in growing out of ULFA's mantle and it miserably failed to broaden its parameters to include the representative voices of Assamese civil society. Rather it tried to usurp the voice of the civil society so as to further the ULFA's cause. As a result, the initial popular enthusiasm that had marked its formation soon gave way to indifference and cynicism. The PCG, instead of taking advantage of the popular goodwill, stuck to its partisan manner of functioning and tried to channelize the popular protests against human rights violations by the security forces into support for the ULFA's viewpoint by floating umbrella organizations like the People's Committee for Peace Initiative (PCPI) manned chiefly by people sympathetic towards the ULFA's cause.

It did not take too long for the people to realize that the ULFA was using the peace process and the slowdown of security operations in the state to further its extortion drive and regroup its cadres for a long-term

offensive against the Indian state. As for direct peace negotiations with the Centre, the very structure and functioning of the ULFA makes it difficult for it to work out a viable agenda for peace. For instance, unlike the Naga National Council (NNC), that spearheaded the Naga struggle during its initial years, the ULFA has, right from the beginning, been a militaristic organization where the political wing has always occupied a subsidiary status. Hence, the success of peace negotiations would invariably depend on the 'commander-in-chief' Paresh Baruah who is said to be in virtual control of the outfit's armoury as well as its district commanders. Earlier efforts in the 1990s by a section of the ULFA leadership led by the Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa to initiate talks with the Centre had failed primarily because of the resistance put up by Paresh Baruah and his supporters. The dominance of the armed wing has also been responsible for the ideological weaknesses of the organization which have been reflected in its increasing alienation from the masses. Moreover, at no stage has the ULFA tried to test the people's will vis-à-vis its programmes and ideology. Any meaningful peace process would call for the active involvement of civil society as has been seen in case of the Naga peace talks. But, the recent wave of killings by the ULFA is further evidence of its isolation from the civil process and has made it extremely difficult for the Assamese civil society to actively involve itself in brokering peace between the militants and the government.

The targeting by the ULFA of some of the most impoverished sections of society is evidence not only of its growing ideological bankruptcy but also of its emergence as a narrow terrorist outfit. Yet, despite the detestable and reprehensible nature of such killings, the unpleasant fact is that ULFA has succeeded in once again bringing to the centre stage its demand for a political settlement of what it terms as the 'Assam-India conflict'. All the major political parties, including the state unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), while unequivocally condemning the murder of innocents, have stressed the need for a negotiated solution of the problem through direct talks with the insurgent outfit. Even senior army officials have ruled out a purely military solution and have underlined the need for talks. The Prime Minister too, while stressing the need for stepped-up security measures throughout the state, has said that insurgency can ultimately be resolved only through dialogue.

All these realizations notwithstanding, circumstances are such that the stage is now set in Assam for intensified security operations against an elusive enemy. Given the nature of the terrain and the degree of support that the ULFA still happens to enjoy in certain rural pockets, it is almost certain that the current security operation, like the previous ones, would not be able to achieve much. It is significant that the ULFA squads that carried out the killings spread over as many as five districts of the state have succeeded in eluding the security net and this just would not have been possible without some measure of support from the local population. Moreover, there are reports that ULFA succeeded in recruiting new cadres from different communities and a substantial number of these happen to be women. With the economic and political factors that have been nourishing the ULFA for almost three decades now, remaining as relevant as ever, it is almost certain that the militant outfit, notwithstanding its aberrations, would continue to hold centre stage in the state's political scenario. As it is, ULFA has of late been trying to carve out a political space for itself by espousing certain popular causes related to issues like Naga encroachments into Assam's territory or the people's resistance to a seismic survey for exploring oil in the Brahmaputra riverbed. Moreover, quite interestingly, in its latest statements it has started referring once again to the 'Assamese people', a term which it had been avoiding consciously for several years. These are indications that the insurgent outfit has been trying to recover some lost space among the Assamese community—something absolutely essential for its survival. One can only hope that excesses on the part of the security forces as they begin their intensified operations against the ULFA, would not provide further opportunities to the latter to consolidate its position.

IV ULFA
Beginning of the End*

With the arrest of ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and deputy Commander-in-chief Raju Baruah by Bangladesh early this month, and their subsequent handover to the Indian authorities, many seem to believe that the curtain is finally about to fall on the 30-year-old insurgency led by the militant organization with its one-point agenda of securing a *swadhin* or independent Assam. Although Bangladesh has officially denied having arrested and pushed them out of the country along with their families, the Indian side has put out the story that the ULFA leaders actually surrendered and were subsequently arrested by the Indian security forces. It has, however, been reported that Indian intelligence agencies tried to convince the ULFA Chairman to sit for talks after giving up the sovereignty demand and finding him reluctant, arrested and produced him before the court. Rajkhowa too has denied that he has surrendered. Whatever the case might be, all this was part of a much-wider move initiated by New Delhi with help from Dacca to put an end to the ULFA-led insurgency in the region. These arrests were preceded a month earlier in November by the surrender of ULFA 'foreign secretary' Sasha Chaudhury and 'finance secretary' Chitraban Hazarika before the Border Security Forces (BSF) near the Indo–Bangla border at Agartala. They are at present lodged in the Guwahati central jail. With this as many as seven members of the ULFA's ten-member 'general council' are now behind the bars. With two other general-council members remaining untraced since the anti-ULFA operations mounted by the Royal Bhutan Army in December 2003, the only major ULFA leader who is now holding out is its powerful Commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah. Baruah has been resolutely opposing talks with the Centre if the issue of sovereignty of Assam does not find a place in the agenda. Although Rajkhowa and his imprisoned colleagues have also been insisting that minus the issue of sovereignty, there could be no talks yet the quickly surfacing inner contradictions within the outfit

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seems to leave it with little option other than to try and work out an honourable exit through negotiations with the Centre.

The sustained elimination of ULFA cadres by the state, the steady erosion of public support for its cause, growing divisions within the top leadership, the unilateral ceasefire declared by its 28th battalion which had been responsible for some of the outfit's most dreaded strikes and, finally, the change of equations in Bangladesh—all seem to have pushed the organization to its present situation. The change of government in Dacca was already making things difficult for it when reports surfaced about ULFA's involvement in the revolt by the Bangladesh Rifles in February 2009. This, along with reports that the outfit had worked against the Awami League in the general elections, seemed to have been the decisive factor in the Sheikh Hasina government's moves to crack down on the ULFA leaders and push them out of the country. Ever since the ULFA leaders moved to Bangladesh in the 1990s and started operating from there, they had invested massive sums in Bangla banks and had built up huge assets for themselves. This, along with the support they received from anti-India elements in Bangladesh, had made Dacca turn a blind eye to the activities of the insurgent outfit. For instance, the ULFA General Secretary Anup Chetia has been in a Bangladesh jail since 1998 and repeated efforts by the Indian authorities to have him sent back to India were met with an indifference by the Bangladesh government.

In the last three decades the ULFA has followed a trajectory which has increasingly taken it away from its stated goal, alienated it from the masses, and pushed it more and more into the groove of terrorisms as an ideology. While it began in April 1979 as an organization committed to putting an end to 'Indian colonial rule' and unlike many of the other ethnic outfits, succeeded in drawing its cadres from all segments of the population, yet the extortions, killings, bomb blasts, and targeting of civilians which included migrant workers from north-Indian states, led to the progressive erosion of public support and sympathy for the outfit which, at one time symbolized for many an Assamese a point of resistance to Indian hegemony. But today the outfit is on the defensive mode, with its Commander-in-chief having apologized for the first time in its history for carrying out the blast at an Independence Day meet in the upper Assam town of Dhemaji in 2004 which left 19 people killed, most of them schoolchildren. Initially, the ULFA had disowned respon-

sibility for the blast which shook the conscience of the entire state, leading to massive erosion of support for the militant outfit. But now the Commander-in-chief has claimed that he was misinformed about the ULFA's role in the blasts and has tried to shift the blame to the leaders of a local unit, many of who belong to its 28th battalion and are now in a ceasefire mode with the government. But such moves to win over popular sympathy have not been able make much headway, with more and more victims of ULFA violence speaking out against the outfit and demanding justice for their kith and kin killed by the organization. Its past seems to be finally catching up with the organization.

Much of the ULFA's present troubles may be traced to its militaristic structure which has stood in the way of inner-party democracy and has often led to lack of proper coordination on policy matters between the different district and local units.[1] The dominance of the armed wing and the district commanders have often led to ideological weaknesses which, in turn, have been reflected in the outfit's growing alienation from the masses. While it is unlikely that a blast of the scale of the one at Dhemaji could have been carried out without the approval of the central leadership, there have been instances of actions carried out all on their own by local units. Though during its early phase the ULFA did try to strike a rapport with the masses through certain welfare measures carried out under the banner of its overground organization, the 'Jatiya Unnayan Parishad', yet it soon retreated into its militaristic shell where secrecy, discipline, and unquestioning obedience to orders seemed to be rule. This is what resulted in grave aberrations and the image of the outfit greatly suffered right from the beginning when mass graves were unearthed at the ULFA camp at Lakhipathar during Operation Bajrang in 1992. This was the period when, following the virtual failure of the Assam Movement, the outfit commanded a large degree of popular support throughout the state. Another noticeable feature of the ULFA's manner of functioning has been that, at no stage of its struggle it has really tried to test the people's support for its actions. Unlike the Naga National Council (NNC) which had carried out a 'plebiscite' and a poll boycott in the early 1950s to mobilize as well as test people's will, the ULFA has never tried to develop any mechanism to do so, although time and again it has made ritualistic noises about a referendum.

Notwithstanding all this, the general mood in the state is clearly in favour of a negotiated settlement of the ULFA issue. Even those who

have been at the receiving end of ULFA violence have expressed themselves in favour of talks. Earlier too there have been efforts to bring the outfit to the negotiating table. Following the ULFA chairman's desire for talks with the Centre, the ULFA has nominated 11 persons to constitute the People's Consultative Group (PCG) in October 2005, raising much hopes of a settlement. This was followed by a brief period of suspension of operations against the outfit in August 2006, while the PCG tried to bring the government and the ULFA to the negotiating table. But the PCG's efforts floundered partly because of its pro-ULFA partisan nature and partly because of pressure from the hardliners within the bureaucracy and the army who were against giving credibility to the organization and favoured an all-out offensive against it. As a result of this, the talks just didn't materialize and, when operations were resumed barely after a month in September, the PCG finally opted out of the negotiations. Meanwhile, security operations against the outfit were intensified and scores of ULFA cadres were gunned down in encounters, most of them being quite controversial.

As on earlier occasions, efforts to open peace negotiations are bound to be bogged down over the question of sovereignty. The ULFA Commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah has made it clear that there could be no talks without the issue of sovereignty being placed in the agenda. Even if all the leaders who are in custody agree towards reframing of the concept of sovereignty to include some form of greater autonomy, it is uncertain if this would work, given the intransigence of the Commander-in-chief. For, within the ULFA's militaristic structure, it has invariably been the armed wing that calls the shots and for years its general council, which is supposed to approve policy guidelines, has not even met. Though the Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa still commands a considerable degree of respect among the cadres, yet it is the Commander-in-chief that virtually controls both the finances and arms of the outfit. This is exactly what Paresh Baruah made clear just after the arrest of the Chairman when he virtually dictated to him not to soften the stand on sovereignty. Thus, without the involvement of the Commander-in-chief, the talks are bound to be uncertain. But even if the government were to go ahead for talks with the ULFA leadership minus the Commander-in-chief, the greatest dilemma before the outfit would be the absence of any blueprint of demands on which the negotiations could begin. For, except doggedly holding on to the issue

of sovereignty, the ULFA has never tried to work out its modalities and what it would actually mean for the people of Assam. Only recently, in a series of articles in the local press,[2] the ULFA Commander-in-chief has tried to hold up a picture of its vision of a Swadhin Asom where the future of the Assamese nationality would be safeguarded.

This vision, however, seems seriously flawed, given its approach to the question of 'colonization' and the 'occupation' of Assam by Indian colonizers which include not only people from the other states but also all those segments of Assamese caste-Hindu population which had migrated over the centuries from different parts of the Indian subcontinent and made Assam their home and contributed immensely to its culture and civilization. It is this segment that is now being accused of carrying with them the seeds of Indian colonization and of hindering the process of Assamese nationality formation which, according to the writer, is being actively aided by the immigrant Muslim population. Moreover, all those communities who came from countries across the region's eastern frontiers and settled in Assam and became a part of the greater Assamese nationality have been accepted as indigenes. Also, while talking of the rights of the smaller ethnic groups, the ULFA Commander-in-chief seems quite clear that these rights would be guaranteed within a greater, composite Assamese nationality, not outside it. Referring to the statehood demands of the small ethnic groups, the article expresses its stiff opposition to any move to further breakup Assam and terms this as a conspiracy of the Indian colonial rulers, while at the same time expressing its support to any ethnic struggle aimed at putting an end to Indian occupation. The main thrust of the argument seems to be limited to the freeing of Assam from all Indian 'occupiers', including those Assamese who see themselves as Indians and hence are traitors to the ULFA's cause, and the acceptance of the indigene-tribal-immigrant Muslim equation. Although Paresh Baruah's articles cannot be seen as an official document of the ULFA, yet coming from the Commander-in-chief it certainly reflects the stand of the outfit in relation to those linguistic groups from other states living in the region who are seen as part of the Indian occupation force. This gains significance in the light of recurrent ULFA attacks on migrant workers and petty traders especially from states like Bihar, a phenomenon which is also to be seen in some of the neighbouring northeastern states, especially in Manipur. Thus, the question of sovereignty for ULFA seems inextricably linked

with de-Indianization above everything else, something which would certainly not appeal to the majority of the Assamese people.

Given such a scenario, the advantages are clearly with the government which is insisting that there can be no talks unless the demand for sovereign Assam is dropped. What, however, New Delhi must keep in mind at this juncture when the ULFA seems to be badly cornered, is that the issues that surfaced in the course of their struggle such as the restructuring of federal powers and the rights of states to their resources still have their relevance and are supported by a wide range of organizations such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU), the Asom Gana Parishad and the Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad from whose ranks initially most of the ULFA cadres were drawn. Significantly, most of these issues were raised by the members from undivided Assam during the Constituent Assembly debates. It also needs to be remembered that the ULFA gained its strength from what may be termed as the failure of the Assam Movement (1979–85) which was easily one of the largest populist agitations in the country's post-independence history. Whatever its aberrations in the form of violence against minority communities in certain areas of the state, the movement succeeded in highlighting the swift demographic change that was taking place in Assam because of continuous migration from across the international boundary with East Pakistan/Bangladesh and the resultant challenge to Assamese identity as also important issues of citizenship and enfranchisement. The movement had gained momentum from ethnic Assamese and tribal fears of being turned into a minority in their own state and of eventually losing political control. But when this six-year agitation failed to provide any tangible solution to the foreign-nationals' issue, it was inevitable that ULFA with its agenda of self-determination should step into the political vacuum. In the absence of any viable political organization to articulate the Assamese grievances over the Centre's failure to pull the state out of the grip of an extractive economy and ensure distributive justice and the rule of law, the ULFA's colonial thesis naturally had many takers. Moreover, the Indian state's reliance on blatantly coercive tactics to suppress the mass agitation, particularly the state violence perpetrated during the controversial elections of 1983, succeeded in alienating the Assamese and also a large section of the plains-tribals from the Indian 'mainstream'. By the time the Assam Accord was signed in August 1985, people's confidence in the Centre had been thoroughly shaken and the

stage was set for the emergence of militant regionalism bordering on separatist politics. That is why despite its self-defeating course, the ULFA continued to occupy a significant space in the Assamese regional imagination. This partly explains the paradox that, even while disapproving of ULFA's terrorist strikes and rejecting its demand for a sovereign Assam, the average Assamese still feels that some of the issues thrown up by its armed confrontation with the state cannot just be wished away. It is perhaps this that was referred to by a leading journalist when he said that 'ethnic sensibilities' were touched when the ULFA Chairman was jostled around in handcuffs while being produced in court, prompting some people to raise pro-ULFA slogans.

Notes

1. I have worked this out in greater detail in my book, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla: IIAS, 2000).

2. *Amar Asom*, Guwahati, 16–18 December 2009.

V Peace Talks or the Fall of the Curtain on ULFA?*

The curtain seems to have finally fallen on the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Three decades of violence claiming some 10,000 lives in the quest for a sovereign Asom have finally ended not with a bang but with a whimper. What seems really striking is not only the swiftness with which the ULFA leadership has totally repudiated its line of armed militancy but also its abandonment of the theory of Indian colonial occupation. The process of its appropriation by the Indian state seems to be well under way, though both the state and

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the central governments are still in favour of continuing the ban on the outfit, given the intransigence of a minority section of the ULFA under the leadership of its Commander-in-chief, Paresh Baruah.

This has been amply reflected in ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa's response to his and his team's brief interactions with the state and central leaders, beginning with the Assam Chief Minister and ending with a 10 minutes meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in mid-February. Rajkhowa and his colleagues were all praise for the efforts of Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and the central leadership to arrive at a 'honourable solution' of the issues confronting the people of Assam and made it clear that his organization has finally dropped the demand for a sovereign Asom, abandoned the path of armed struggle and is in favour of a negotiated political solution within the Indian constitution. One would naturally wonder as to how this change has come about in an organization which till the other day had been insisting that the issue of sovereignty must figure in any discussions with the Indian government.

ULFA would have one believe that this change in its positioning has occurred because of its respect for the wishes of the 'people of Assam' represented purportedly by the civil society conglomerate known as the Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibartan (SJA) which was formed last year and which has been calling for the initiation of peace parleys with the government, beginning with the release of the imprisoned ULFA leaders. The Rajkhowa-led ULFA has declared that the SJA has been given the responsibility of preparing the blueprint of its talks with the central government and that ULFA is prepared to do exactly as it is told by the civil society body which it believes represents the voice of the people of the state. The SJA, on its part, has set up several subcommittees to go into the political, social, and economic issues confronting the people of Assam and is preparing the draft which would focus on more autonomy for the state while dealing with major issues like illegal immigration from Bangladesh, rights over land and resources, problems of the ethnic communities, and the problem of unemployment. The SJA would soon place the draft before the central executive committee of ULFA with the instruction that the leadership could add or delete some of the points but would have to stick to the issue of greater autonomy, sovereignty being too unrealistic a demand.

The people of Assam should have been happy that civil society intervention has brought about such a sea change in an organization that has been, in its quest to put an end to Indian 'colonial' occupation and create a sovereign Assam, leading a three-decade-old armed movement against the Indian state. There should have been further cause for satisfaction that the ULFA which often targeted the civilian population, indulged in random killings and abductions and contributed in no small measure towards silencing the voice of civil society in the state, should today submit itself to such a civil society initiative for peace. What, however, has led to some doubts is the manner in which the ULFA has given almost complete responsibility to the saw to chalk out the agenda of its talks with the centre. How is it that a militant organization with 32 years of armed struggle against the Indian state does not even have any political agenda which could have formed the basis of a rough framework of demands for initiating talks with the centre? It is a well-known fact that right from the beginning the ULFA had been insisting that sovereignty must come from the core of any negotiations with the Government of India and that such negotiations should take place in a foreign country under international supervision. Under such circumstances, it is rather strange that it should today invest a civil society conglomerate made up of people with differing ideologies and viewpoints, with the authority to actually prepare a blueprint of its talks, minus all these major conditions.

That the ULFA is left without a cause after abandoning its demand for a sovereign Asom became clear when its leadership skilfully avoided mentioning any issues during the meetings with the central leaders. The meetings with the Union Home Minister and the Prime Minister were just 'introductory' in nature and without any agenda. That almost the entire top leadership of the ULFA turned up in Delhi without even a rough draft for the talks signifies the measure of the political and ideological bankruptcy of an organization which began with vaguely socialist pretensions and finally ended up in the terrorist groove of serial blasts, extortions, and the targeting of innocents. It is also being questioned as to how a draft seeking greater autonomy for the state prepared by the civil-society group could in any way be radically different from similar demands that have already been raised by several regional political outfits and student organizations including the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chattra Parishad (AJYCP).

It is in this context that many believe that the civil society initiative should have been limited to facilitating the talks between the ULFA and the Centre and going beyond this to prepare the agenda itself for the militant organization could prove to be self-defeating for a variety of reasons. One is reminded of the earlier move for talks under the aegis of the People's Consultative Group (PCG) which had been set up at the initiative of both the chairman and the head of the armed wing of ULFA in September 2005 and which ended within a year without making much headway. The ULFA Chairman, who had a major say in forming the PCG, has now ruled out its relevance by saying that it was an 'unconstitutional' body because it did not have the sanction of the general council, thereby pushing the blame to the recalcitrant ULFA military head, Paresh Baruah.

Parallels have naturally been drawn between the peace talks with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland [NSCN (I–M)] and it has been insisted that similar modalities be followed in the Centre-ULFA talks. But it needs to be appreciated that the two situations are very different. The Centre-NSCN (I–M) talks began with a ceasefire and the modalities were worked out as per the demands of the Naga insurgent group that the negotiations begin in a foreign country, and that the uniqueness of the Naga history and its relationship with the Indian Union is acknowledged. The Naga side had a blueprint and the role of civil society was limited primarily to putting pressure on both sides to abjure violence and keep on with the negotiations. In the case of ULFA, all the top leaders, barring Paresh Baruah, had either surrendered or had been arrested by Bangladesh authorities and handed over to India, put behind bars and released on bail with severe restrictions in order to facilitate the process of negotiations. And, most important of all, the NSCN (I–M) has put up a unified front against the Centre, much unlike the position of the ULFA when its military head has openly rejected the move for talks minus the issue of sovereignty and has stated his resolve to continue with the armed struggle. Although a formal split has not yet occurred and the pro-talks ULFA leadership is still hoping that the Paresh Baruah faction would finally acquiesce to talks within the ambit of the Indian constitution, all this clearly gives the advantage to the government as far as the peace parleys are concerned.

While civil society in the state has generally welcomed the recent developments involving the peace negotiations and the suspension of violence, it cannot be said that there is an unquestioning acceptance by the people of the ULFA leadership's apparent change of heart. There are sizeable sections within the civil society who would want the perpetrators of violence to be punished as per the rule of law and who, while unhesitatingly welcoming the return to peace, would not want the peace process to mean a general amnesty to the ULFA leadership. Several of the ethnic organizations like the All Asom Tai Ahom Students Union, whose president Dimbeswar Gogoi was tortured and killed by the ULFA in November 1989, have questioned the welcome accorded to Rajkhowa on his release from prison and have refused to be taken in by the apologies rendered by the organization. Similar is the position of those hundreds of families which have lost their kin to ULFA violence. The victims of ULFA violence in the state have organized themselves under the banner of the Terror Victims Family Forum and have been resisting any blanket amnesty. These are but a few instances of public resistance to the unqualified acceptance of the ULFA leadership's attempt to return to the politics of dialogue and negotiations by stating that all its killings (and also those by the State) during the three-decade-long insurgency were 'absolute mistakes'.

The ULFA leadership has been insisting that its decision to quit the politics of violence has been in deference to the wishes of the people of the state as expressed in the Jatiya Abhibartan or civil society conclave of 2010. Yet, from the statements of the leaders it appears that this may not be quite true. For, in the statement released to the press by its spokesperson Mithinga Daimary on 6 February 2011, the organization makes it clear that actually it was the change in the political situation of the region and the global situation that compelled it to change course drastically. The ULFA's fortunes which had taken a dip after the operations launched in Bhutan in December 2003, conducted jointly by the Indian security forces and the Royal Bhutanese Army, were further affected when there was a change of government in Bangladesh led by Sheikh Hasina which made it increasingly difficult for it to continue with its activities from that country. Thus, its spokesperson says that 'there is every possibility of seeking a military solution turning suicidal in the *changed political situation in the region*. The global situation also

plays a major role in determining the success or failure of a struggle' (emphasis mine).

Hence, it is clear that it was the changes in Bangladesh along with those in the international front, rather than just the wishes of the people of Assam, which compelled the organization to drop its demand for sovereignty and opt for unconditional talks. But the ULFA's commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah refuses to accept the mandate of the general council chaired by Arabinda Rajkhowa and maintains that the 'General Council chaired by our Chairman was unconstitutional as the meeting was held under the influence of our enemy (the government)'. It is significant that Paresh Baruah is referring to Rajkhowa as 'our Chairman', thereby ruling out any imminent split in the organization and keeping his options open.

Given Baruah's armed strength and his capacity to subvert the talks (in a rather significant recent development, the Paresh Baruah-led faction has accused the Congress of trying to divide the ULFA and has said that it would target Congress poll meetings and warned the people to stay away from them), the ULFA leadership is treading a cautious line by not initiating any action against its Commander-in-chief despite the latter declaring the general council resolutions as unconstitutional. But it remains to be seen as to whether such a policy will pay dividends and help both the Government of India and the ULFA leadership to arrive at an 'honourable solution' as promised by the Prime Minister. Notwithstanding the ever-shrinking space of ULFA in the Assamese imagination, the people of the state have been living with the paradox of rejecting the ULFA's terror tactics and its demand for a sovereign Asom and yet nourishing some degree of sympathy for the issues that it had thrown up in the course of its struggle. Therefore, there are naturally still those who would hope that the well-intentioned SJA, by preparing the ULFA's agenda for talks, would provide it with an honourable exit at the fall of the curtain. But that too seems quite uncertain as long as the faction led by Paresh Baruah, however small, continues to stick to its demand for sovereignty and stays outside the ambit of negotiations.

B
The Bodo Movement

I Introduction

The Bodo Movement for a separate state and a fifty-fifty division of Assam is today passing through a critical stage. The creation of the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) and the coming to power of the Bodoland People's Party (BPP)[1] was initially seen as the beginning of the empowerment of the Bodo community. Though the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) has initiated several measures for the upliftment of the Bodo people, yet certain developments seem to prove that the creation of geopolitical spaces alone need not necessarily be the only answer to ethnic identity demands. It may be recalled that the Bodoland Accord of February 1993 had first hit the rocks when the Centre and the State governments refused to include the 10-kilometer-wide belt in the north touching the Indo–Bhutan border as well as 515 more villages within the BTAD. Added to this was the split in the Bodo Movement itself which made the Accord infructuous. Subsequently in February 2003 the Memorandum of Settlement was arrived at and the BTAD was formed after carving out the Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri, and Chirang districts. But the creation of an autonomous territorial unit for the Bodos did not bring any major change in the lives of the common Bodo peasants, the majority of whom were landless. It did not take long for the Bodo leadership to realize soon after Bodoland was formed, that, with the overwhelming majority of Bodos being landless and the demographic balance clearly not in their favour, the main aim of their struggle would, in the long run, be subverted. The wide-scale attacks by the Bodos on immigrant Muslims in the Bodo areas of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon in 1993, 1994, and 1996 were obviously part of an attempt to drive the immigrants out of the cultivable land. In the 1994 disturbances, as many as 50,000 immigrant Muslims were rendered homeless and, while some have returned to their villages after peace was restored, several thousand displaced people are still in refugee camps. The May

1996 attacks by Bodos on tea-garden tribes or Adivasis in the Kokrajhar area, leaving scores dead and leading to a mass exodus,[2] is also linked to the land factor. The Bodo sense of desperation is clearly linked with the realization that they constitute a minority in the areas covered by the BTAD.

The situation today has been further compounded by the assertion on the part of the non-Bodo population that under the new dispensation their rights as citizens have been severely impinged upon and that they have been reduced to the status of second-class citizens. Right from the beginning there was resistance on the part of the non-Bodo population to the inclusion of Bodo-minority villages in the BTAD. This section, which is primarily made up of the Koch–Rajbongshis[3], immigrant neo-Assamese Muslims, caste-Hindu Assamese, Gorkhalis, Bengali-Hindus, and tea tribes/Adivasis, has been maintaining that the Bodos do not constitute a majority in more than half of the 3,000 or so villages that are under BTC. The non-Bodo population has organized itself under the banner of Non-Bodo Suraksha Samity (NBSS),[4] and has organized mass rallies to demand that 'discrimination' against the non-Bodos be stopped and only villages with more than 50 per cent Bodo population be included in the BTAD. They have also expressed their resolve to oppose any moves for the creation of a separate Bodoland state by dividing Assam. Thus, the stage is clearly set for confrontation.

In order to check the sudden upsurge among the non-Bodo population within Bodoland, the Bodos have stepped up their demand for a separate Bodoland state. To counter this, the Rajbongshi have been consistently demanding a separate state for themselves, while the Adivasis too, in a recent move, have raised the demand for a separate homeland within the BTC. Thus, the ground situation has changed considerably with the Bodo militant groups, except for a faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), having opted for constitutional means of struggle or in the negotiation mode with the Government of India. While militancy was at its peak, the non-Bodo population was frequently targeted and this section of people naturally maintained a low profile.[5] But with signs of the Bodo Movement itself being fragmented, a common front of the non-Bodos is emerging and, with this, the political equations are bound to change. Neither the Centre nor the state government seems to be in favour of further bifurcation of Assam because that would create more problems than solving them. What,

however, the present Bodoland imbroglio reveals is the issue of constitutional rights of people who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group for whom a separate geopolitical space has been created. The issue has been further complicated by the fact that the dominant group is not demographically the majority group. The question, therefore, naturally arises as to whether the creation of new political and territorial spaces in the form of ethnic homelands for a particular community/nationality can solve the problem of alternate nationalisms and the constitutional and human rights of large segments of people belonging to other ethnic groups. It is a pity that ethnic movements aimed at securing the rights of small nationalities have ended up in exclusivist grooves, leaving little space for other ethnic minorities in their own areas. All this brings into focus once again the intractable issues involved in trying to create autonomous spaces in a highly heterogeneous context. The rights of minorities in newly-created ethnic homelands is an issue which at some stage will have to be seriously addressed by the State.

Notes

1. The BPP has been a coalition partner in a Congress-BPP government since the 2006 elections and BPP legislators hold some key ministerial berths in the Tarun Gogoi-led government.

2. According to tea-garden labour leaders, more than 50,000 Adivasis continue to live in refugee camps following the disturbances of 1994.

3. The Koch–Rajbongshis have long been agitating for both scheduled-tribe status and a separate homeland called Kamtapur encompassing areas in both Assam and Bengal. One of the major ethnic groups living in the BTAD area, the Rajbongshi struggle poses a distinct challenge to Bodo dreams of a united Bodo homeland spread over both the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra.

4. Several student bodies including the All Assam Minority Students Union, All Bodoland Minority Students Union, All Assam Koch–Rajbongshi Students Union, Bengali Students Federation, All Assam Gorkha Students Union, and the All Assam Tea Tribes Students Union have extended their support to the movement being spearheaded by the NBSS. The AASU has also extended its support to the NBSS.

5. Following the infructuous Bodo Accord of 2003, the non-Bodo population had organized themselves under different banners. But these civil-society organizations couldn't exert much influence because the over-

all climate of fear owing to the attacks on non-Bodo villagers being carried out by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) which was not part of the Accord.

II Bodo Stir
Complex Issues, Unattainable Demands*

The possibility of a meaningful dialogue between the All Bodo Students Union (Upen Brahma group) [ABSU (UB)] and the Government of Assam towards finding a negotiated settlement of the Bodo question has once again been greatly reduced by the ABSU (UB)'s refusal to talk directly to Dispur. The Assam government though initially reluctant to have a central observer at the talks, has now been calling upon the ABSU (UB) leadership to come to the negotiating table and has not even insisted that the latter abjure violence as a precondition for discussions. In its latest stand, the ABSU (UB) has said that it would participate in tripartite talks only if invited by the Union Home Minister and, to put its message across to Dispur and New Delhi, the ABSU (UB) has called for yet another bandh, this time lasting 300 hours, commencing on 16 May. Through this, the ABSU (UB) feels it can continue to mount its pressure on the Assam government and the Centre to concede its main political demand—the creation of a separate full-fledged state of 'Bodoland' for the plains-tribes of Assam.

The Centre, for its part, seems to be rethinking its earlier stand on the Bodo issue and the ABSU(UB)-led movement, particularly after the progressive slide of the agitation into violent channels. In its latest statements in parliament and elsewhere, the Union government has at least gone on record that it is against any further division of Assam. Though it has not yet disapproved of the violent methods adopted by the ABSU (UB), there are signs that New Delhi is reassessing the Bodo stir. One

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such indication has been the recent arrest of a group of Bodo activists in Shillong while negotiating the purchase of arms. Till then Shillong as well as other parts of Congress (I)-ruled Meghalaya had been a safe haven for Bodo activists who announced most of their agitational programmes from the Meghalaya capital. During his talks with the Union Home Minister in early May, Prafulla Mahanta was told for the first time to deal 'firmly' with the Bodo agitationists, while at the same time keeping the doors for negotiations open.

The Centre's change of stance seems to have been motivated by the increasing realization that support to and abetment of the ABSU(UB)-led movement for a separate Bodoland would finally alienate the Assamese from the politics of the Congress(I). As things stand today, the state Congress (I) is clearly divided between the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley Congressmen and this has been reflected in the former opposing the setting up of a central university in Cachar district. Moreover, the continuance of the Bodoland agitation would encourage other ethnic and tribal groups to demand separation from Assam and this would create a situation which even a Congress (I) government in the state would not be in a position to handle. The 1985 elections showed that Congress (I) fortunes were badly hit because of the alienation of the bulk of the Assamese resistance against which the party's traditional votebanks comprising immigrant Muslims and Bengali-Hindus did not prove of much help. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government's inability to function effectively on several fronts has naturally encouraged the Congress (I) leadership of the Brahmaputra Valley to work towards recovering lost ground. As such, it has not viewed with favour the tactics adopted by Santosh Mohan Dev, the Union Minister of state for home, to create a difficult situation for the AGP by fuelling ethnic separatist tendencies. Such divisive tactics, a large section of Assamese Congress (I) leaders feel, would prove self-defeating for the party.

Another significant factor which seems to have contributed to the central Congress (I) leadership's reassessment of the Bodo agitation is the increasing spate of violence against immigrant Muslim settlers in Bodo-dominated areas. In the struggle for land, the tribals have not only been edged out by the non-tribal Assamese but also by immigrant Hindu and Muslim settlers and the Nepalis. In the tribal blocks and belts, tribal land has, over generations, been usurped by rich and middle non-tribal peasants. Even in the state's reserved forests, Nepalis, former

tea-garden workers as well as immigrant Muslims form a sizeable section of the settlers. As per figures released by the state government, in 1986 the Nepalis, immigrant Muslims, former tea-garden workers, and non-tribal Assamese constituted almost half of the total number of settlers in the 25 forest divisions of the state where some 1,74,489 hectares are under occupation. With the ABSU (UB) movement gaining momentum, it is but inevitable that demands would be made to clear tribal areas of non-tribal pockets. The 'quit notices' issued on the non-Bodo population in Kokrajhar district and Udalguri subdivision by the ABSU (UB) are a clear indication that in the present agitation in which the land factor is of predominant importance, the brunt of the Bodo anger will have to be finally borne not only by the non-tribal Assamese but also by the immigrant Muslims and other settlers. The growing tension between the immigrant Muslims and the tribals was highlighted during the last session of the Assam assembly when a United Minorities Front member accused the AGP of inciting the Muslim settlers against the Bodo tribals.

The Congress which had ruled Assam ever since 1947, with a brief Janata spell in 1978–9 and the present-AGP rule since December 1985, has been directly responsible for the alienation of tribal land and the overall economic backwardness of the state's tribal communities. With leading Bodo politicians like Charan Narzary of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) accusing the Congress (I) of inciting ethnic passions and having a direct hand in the ABSU-led movement, it shouldn't take long for the state Congress (I) leadership, particularly of the Brahmaputra Valley, to realize that divisive politics is bound to boomerang on its own election fortunes. Therefore, Congress (I) leaders of the Brahmaputra Valley have made it plain to the central leadership that any support, even indirect, to a move to further divide Assam would only help to consolidate the AGP's rank and file and would neutralize whatever gains the party has been making out of the AGP government's poor performance. Notwithstanding the failure of the AGP government to keep many of its pledges, leading to growing disenchantment among its support bases, the Congress (I) is yet to recover from its isolation during the AASU-led movement and particularly its performance in the 1983 elections. The party's role in the language agitation of 1960, the movement for an oil refinery in 1968, the 1972 agitation regarding the

medium of instruction and, of course, the anti-foreigner upsurge of 1979–85 is now being repeatedly highlighted by the local press which has always been a major force in mobilizing support for the regional party. Moreover, it is also being recalled that it was Indira Gandhi herself who, by announcing on 13 January 1967 that Assam would be reorganized on a federal basis, had initiated the move to further balkanize the state. Within a month of this announcement by the then Prime Minister, the ABSU and the PTCA were formed and a demand for a separate state for the plains tribals was put forward. With such a legacy of fomenting divisive forces, the Congress (I) in Assam must now tread cautiously.

A lot of parallels are being drawn between the AASU-led movement on the foreign nationals issue and the ABSU (UB) agitation. The initial phases of the ABSU movement were marked by bandhs, road and rail blockades, and mass mobilization efforts and tactics borrowed from the AASU movement which were further perfected. But it did not take long for the ABSU (UB)-led struggle to deviate from peaceful forms of protest. Ever since the movement intensified some six months back, the ABSU leadership, while formally disclaiming the violent acts, has not hesitated to declare that if necessary they would even seek foreign help to achieve their goal of a separate Bodoland. While it is true that excesses committed by the police during the initial phases of the ABSU (UB) movement alienated large sections of the Bodo population, this does not explain the character of the violence which has marked the agitation in recent months. That the Bodo militants have been able to sustain their violent struggle against the police and the para-military forces shows that there must have been some long-term preparation towards this end. Till the middle of April over 150 people had been killed by the militants. The dead include over 30 state-government employees and 10 members of the PTCA. Although the exact figures of those killed in police firings and 'encounters' are not known, yet it appears that their number almost equals that of those killed in extremist violence. A marked feature of the ABSU (UB) violence has been the attacks on PTCA supporters. The PTCA–ABSU (UB) clashes have lent a fratricidal element to the Bodo agitation and have placed the two major Bodo organizations in an irreconcilable position. Apart from hitting out at those sections of the Bodos which are opposed to separation from Assam, the ABSU (UB) militants seem to be bent on creating a situation in the Kokrajhar district and the Udalguri subdivision which would

compel the exodus of the non-tribal population from these areas. The 'quit notices' issued to the non-tribal population are obviously part of a greater design to create a homogeneous Bodo-populated area, thereby altering the present situation when it is alleged that even in Kokrajhar and Udalguri the Bodos are a minority. The pattern of the violence and the targets of attack by ABSU (UB) militants show, on the one hand, that the ABSU would like to keep up its siege at all costs while on the other hand, they also show that with the increasing slide into violence, the movement might have gone partly out of control of the moderate section of the ABSU (UB) leadership. Attacks on school buildings, bazaars, and public buildings (till the middle of April the militants had burnt down 73 school and college buildings and 53 government buildings, and destroyed approximately 150 bridges) have had a negative effect even in the ABSU strongholds, not to speak of areas where the PTCA or other tribal organizations hold sway. The disruption of road and rail links has resulted in severe shortage of essential commodities, making life even more difficult for the common man. As the struggle gets prolonged and the possibility of realization of Bodoland becomes remote, the mass support which the ABSU (UB) claims at present is bound to be eroded.

A sharp difference between the AASU-led movement and the current ABSU (UB)-led one is that while the AASU leaders succeeded in keeping their six-year-old movement by and large peaceful, notwithstanding the occasional outbursts of violence and the undercurrents of communal tension, the ABSU (UB) opted for violent tactics at a relatively early phase of the struggle. This recourse to violence could be the ABSU (UB)'s undoing. The terrorist methods adopted by the ABSU (UB) militants have already made several tribal organizations suspicious and apprehensive of their final intentions. At a meeting of six important tribal organizations in January, not only was the AGP government condemned for its failure to effectively curb the violence, but the tactics adopted by the ABSU (UB) were also thoroughly disapproved of. The organizations represented at the joint meeting were the PTCA, the All-Assam Tribal Sangha, the All-Assam Tribal Students Union, the All-Assam Tiwa (Lalung) Sanmelan, the Lalung Durbar, and the Lalung Youth Front. Obviously, these and other tribal organizations have come to view the ABSU-led violence as an attempt by the latter to establish its

hegemony over all the other plains tribes. In a recent development, the Rabha Yuva Chatra Parishad reiterated its opposition to any further division of Assam and demanded that any moves towards a settlement of the Bodo issue should also involve the other plains tribes. The Rabhas, who numbered some one and a half lakhs according to the 1971 Census, have long been considered a part of the 'greater Bodo community' but the ABSU (UB)'s violent tactics seem to be proving counterproductive.

The ABSU (UB)'s recourse to violent methods may be traced to its eagerness to attract central attention as well as to establish itself as the most powerful plains-tribal organization in the state. But the main obstacle which the ABSU (UB) is increasingly facing in its quest of a separate homeland for the Bodo is the unwillingness of the other smaller ethnic groups to accept Bodo hegemony. Just as the Bodo middle class is today fighting its non-tribal Assamese counterpart for its rightful share of jobs, the time will soon come in the new tribal homeland when the Rabhas, the Mishings, and the other tribal groups would be at loggerheads with the comparatively advanced Bodos. Both the PTCA and the ABSU (UB) have been aware of the mutual suspicion which a demand for a separate homeland could generate among the different tribal communities. The fear of Bodo dominance was one of the main reasons why the demand for Udayachal put forward by the PTCA did not make much headway. Though the PTCA had formally named the proposed tribal homeland as 'Udayachal' only in 1973, the proposal for the creation of an 'autonomous region' for the plains tribals of Assam had been put forward as early as 1967. Later on in 1980 the PTCA and the ABSU submitted a joint memorandum to Indira Gandhi asking for the creation of a 'Mishing–Bodoland'. The hope then was that the Mishings too could be won over to launch a joint movement. This, however, did not work because the Mishings were unwilling to accept Bodo leadership in the matter. Realizing the limited nature of its appeal for a tribal autonomous region with union territory status, the PTCA changed its tactics and almost shelved its demand. During the brief spell of the Janata rule in 1978–9, the PTCA joined the ministry and gave up its agitation for a separate homeland. Soon, however, the PTCA split, and the PTCA (Progressive) headed by Benoy Khongir Basumatary was formed. It was this faction of the PTCA which finally named itself as the United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) in 1984. Its

militant approach attracted the ABSU (UB) which has since worked in close collaboration with the UTNLF.

When attempts to bring in the other plains tribes within the ambit of the Bodoland agitation failed, the ABSU (UB) decided to move ahead on its own. The earlier vague demand for a 'tribal homeland' was now given up in favour of a full-fledged state of 'Bodoland' for the plains tribals. The implications of this were obvious. In the proposed Bodoland, the leadership would be that of the Bodos who would constitute the overwhelming majority. And in the 92-point charter of demands which the ABSU (UB) submitted to the Assam government and on the basis of which it launched its movement in March 1987, as many as 27 demands relate to the Bodo language. Though there are several demands which relate to the plains tribals in general and also some demands which would apply to the non-tribal sections of the population, yet the emphasis is clearly on Bodo demands and not on those of the other tribal groups. Although ABSU (UB) has still been claiming that it represents the wishes of all the plains tribals, its charter does not have any demands relating to the language and culture of the Rabhas or the Mishings. But there are such demands as the introduction of the Bodo language in the Roman script in West Bengal and the broadcasting of Bodo programmes from All India Radio Siliguri—demands which are clearly aimed at future unification of the Bodo-speaking people of the two states. Interestingly, one of the demands was related to the acceptance of 1951 as the cut-off year for the detection and expulsion of foreign nationals. The last demand in the 92-point charter relates to the establishment of a separate state for the 'plains tribals' of Assam in the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The original charter of demands was soon to be reduced to three 'political' demands: (a) the creation of a separate state of 'Bodoland' for the plains tribals of Assam; (b) the setting up of district councils in the tribal areas in the south bank of the Brahmaputra; and (c) the inclusion of the Bodo–Kacharis of Karbi Anglong in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Thus the ABSU (UB) has given up speaking for all the plains tribals and has emerged as the spokesman of a section of the Bodos. Its claim to represent the entire Bodo population is contested not only by the PTCA which still commands considerable following among the Bodos, but also by that

faction of the ABSU (UB) which is led by Gangadhar Ramchiary and which has been agitating for redressal of tribal grievances on the basis of its 35-point charter of demands. There have been allegations that the Centre had a hand in making the ABSU (UB) give up its original charter of demands and make its demands more specifically applicable to the Bodos; yet, apart from this, the inner contradictions of the plains-tribal groups of the state must have prompted ABSU (UB) to chart out a new strategy which would have greater appeal for the Bodo people as a whole. But the violent tactics adopted by the ABSU (UB), particularly in relation to the PTCA, have alienated a large section of the Bodos who have been traditional supporters of the PTCA. The ABSU (UB)'s alliance with the UTNLF, fierce opponents of the PTCA, has further divided the Bodos on political lines. Some observers also see a growing religious divide, with the majority of the ABSU (UB) and UTNLF leaders being Christians, while the PTCA leadership is predominantly Hindu. The Bodo community is, thus, divided on the question of separation from Assam and though the ABSU (UB) commands the largest mass support at present, it remains to be seen as to how long this will last. For the complex issues thrown up within the Bodo society itself by the nature and tactics of the ABSU (UB)-led movement may, in the long run, prove too difficult to sort out.

The Bodo demand for a separate homeland has been further complicated by the fact that the Bodos do not inhabit a contiguous area and are spread over different districts of the state on both the banks of the Brahmaputra. Moreover, there are scores of villages where the population is a mixture of Bodos, other plains tribals and non-tribal Assamese like the Rajbongshi. According to the 1971 Census (there was no census in Assam in 1981), in the Brahmaputra Valley districts the plains-tribal population would be some 12 lakhs out of a total population of approximately 106 lakhs. Out of this, the Bodos then numbered some 6 lakhs only. The 1971 Census put the figure of Bodo-speaking people at 5.3 lakhs, i.e., 3.65 per cent of the total population of the state. The Bodos are concentrated in the Goalpara, Lakhimpur, and Kamrup and Darrang districts, apart from Kokrajhar. But even in their stronghold, the Kokrajhar district, the Bodos numbered about 28 per cent of the total population, while the total plains-tribal population stood at 35 per cent. A look at the population figures of some of the *thanas* where

the ABSU (UB) agitation is most intense reveals that, even in areas like Paneri and Udalguri, the Bodo population varies between 30 and 35 per cent. Observers feel that given a maximum growth rate of 40 per cent in the last 10 years and accepting all the other plains tribes (excluding the Mishings who numbered some 2.6 lakhs in the 1971 Census) as belonging to the greater Bodo community, the present strength of the plains tribals in the Brahmaputra Valley would not exceed 25 lakhs. The ABSU (UB) and the UTNLF, however, refuse to go by these figures and dismiss the 1971 Census figures as having been manipulated by vested interests. Both these organizations claim that in the area for a separate tribal state which they have charted out in the north bank of the Brahmaputra, the plains tribals would account for over 42 lakhs out of a total population of 61 lakhs people inhabiting some 25,478 kilometres. Even if the 1971 Census had been manipulated, the figures put forward by the ABSU (UB) appear untenable. If the 1971 Census had been manipulated, there is every reason to believe that the 1961 Census too had suffered the same fate. But between 1961 and 1971 the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population is shown to have registered a growth rate of 34.67 per cent, increasing from 14,25,655 to 19,19,947. The ABSU (UB) has, however, not commented on the 1961 figures.

Despite the arguments put forward by the ABSU(UB), it seems clear that let alone the Bodos, the STs as a whole do not constitute a viable number in any of the present districts of Assam in order to be able to form a separate homeland of their own. Even the Centre was aware of this demographic pattern disfavouring a separate state for the plains-tribals of Assam and discounted such a possibility in a communication from the union home ministry to the PTCA. In its letter dated 16 October 1984, the home ministry noted:

> Regarding the demand for a separate union territory/state comprising the majority plains tribal areas, it is seen that the areas indicated by the PTCA for the proposed state or union territory are not geographically contiguous. It has also not been established that the plains tribal population constitutes a majority in all these areas. It has also not been possible to substantiate the inaccuracies pointed out in the 1971 Census as regards alleged miscounting the tribal population. The demand, therefore, for a separate political unit does not appear to be in the larger interest of the plains tribals of the north eastern region as a whole.

Though the demand for a separate state for the Bodos has naturally overshadowed many of the important issues thrown up by the ABSU (UB)-led movement, yet the question of viability of such a homeland need not necessarily be the central point in a discussion on the tribal demands. Ever since the PTCA was formed in 1967, the Bodos, and occasionally the other STs acting under a predominantly Bodo middle-class leadership, have been trying to draw the state government's attention to their overall plight, ranging from the land question to employment. It is true that the AGP government could have acted with a greater degree of promptness and sympathy to the ABSU (UB) demands; instead initially it tried to tackle the agitation as a law and order problem, resulting in a series of police excesses which further alienated the tribal population, yet it is also true that the AGP government has only inherited a legacy of long years of socio-economic neglect and land alienation as far as the plains tribals are concerned. With the pressure on tribal land mounting and additional employment shrinking, the emerging Bodo middle class organized itself politically and, like its Assamese counterpart, made the issue of language one of the main planks in its struggle. Just as in the case of the Assamese middle class, land and language have become the main rallying points of the Bodo ethnic revival.

The Assamese middle class, instead of viewing the Bodo demands with a measure of sympathy and understanding, viewed these as threats to the composite Assamese identity. The decision to make Bodo an associate official language in the Kokrajhar district and the Udalguri subdivision was a half-hearted measure which is yet to be implemented. The condition of Bodo-medium schools is decidedly pitiable and not much governmental effort has been made to produce standard textbooks and appoint qualified teachers. A big backlog exists in most of the government jobs reserved for the STs. Figures up to 1986 reveal that while in the upper echelons, the backlog is not much, in the fourth-grade jobs there is a considerable backlog. For example, up to 1986, out of the 83 fourth-grade jobs (10 per cent of the total) reserved for the STs of the plains in the secretariat at Dispur, only 17 had been filled up. Thus, the neglect of the plains tribals goes back to the Congress-ruled days and the major failure of the AGP has been that it has made no serious effort to change the situation. Rather, it has attempted to continue the Congress legacy and even perfect it. The districts of Kokrajhar, Darrang, Lakhimpur, and Kamrup are amongst the least developed. Poverty is a

common factor for both the tribal and the non-tribal peasants and in Kokrajhar district the Rajbangshis who are the most populous group are as badly off as, if they are not worse off than, their scheduled-tribe brethren. It would perhaps be too much to expect of the AGP government to remedy a situation which has been created by long years of neglect by successive Congress governments. But the AGP could at least have made a sincere attempt towards reducing the imbalances. Instead, the AGP government seems too enmeshed in its narrow calculations to be able to give heed to genuine tribal grievances.

III Bodoland
The Burden of History*

The burden of history is proving ever so heavy for the indigenous peoples of Assam. Since the 1930s,[1] the issues of land, immigration, demographic change, and identity have been core ones in this region. In the years immediately preceding independence when the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Muslim League were ranged against each other on the question of immigration of land-hungry peasants from then East Bengal, the Assam Legislative Assembly debated at length on the land question, the rights of tribal communities to their lands, and the demand by the immigrants to scrap the Line System.[2]

In 1937 the Assam Assembly set up a committee headed by F.W. Hockenhull to look into the entire issue of land and suggest measures which could be acceptable to all the parties concerned. In his report submitted a year later, Hockenhull observed that although the indigenous people by themselves would not be able to develop the wastelands, yet he insisted that the Line System should continue and suggested stronger and more effective steps to prevent alienation of tribal land. Following the Hockenhull Report, the Congress ministry headed by Gopinath Bardoloi initiated several measures aimed at freeing the protected tribal

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land from encroachers. But permission for new settlements to landless peasants, both Assamese and immigrants was not stopped. Hence, the pressure from the immigrant lobby continued. Things took a different turn when, in November 1939, the Bardoloi ministry resigned following the All India Congress Committee's war directive and Syed Muhammad Saadulla took over with the full backing of the Muslim League. Soon after taking charge, Saadulla signed an agreement with the Assam Tribal League[3] which surprisingly did not have any specific clauses on the land question, despite the latter's insistence that the Line System should be strictly enforced to protect tribal land. Instead, Saadulla went ahead with his plan for settlement of Muslim immigrants as demanded by the Muslim League which, in its first provincial conference held in November 1939, insisted that the Line System be totally scrapped and land be made available to all immigrants from East Bengal. However, the Saadulla ministry fell in December 1941 because of the withdrawal of support from the independent Assamese member Rohini Kumar Chaudhury and two other MLAs. Governor's rule followed and in March 1942 the Governor scrapped the land development scheme.

But when Saadulla returned to power on August 1942, the situation was politically quite congenial for him to go ahead with his land development scheme which was clearly intended to ensure continuing support from the Muslim League legislators who had made their intentions clear of bringing in more immigrants into the province.[4] Meanwhile pressure was also mounting from the Muslim League government in West Bengal where the state assembly passed a resolution calling upon Assam to open up its reserves to land-hungry immigrants from Bengal.[5] Within a year of his assuming office, in August 1943 the Saadulla ministry adopted a new resolution on land settlement which provided for the opening up of grazing reserve areas and wastelands in the districts of Nowgong, Darrang, and Kamrup to immigrants from Bengal as part of the 'Grow More Food' programme[6] aimed at helping the war economy.

This scheme called for distribution of wastelands and the de-reservation of select grazing reserves in the Nowgong district, the de-reservation of professional grazing reserves in Kamrup and Darrang and the opening up of surplus reserves in all the submontane areas ostensibly for settlement of landless people, the overwhelming majority of whom were Muslim immigrants. Referring to this Amalendu Guha writes:

S.P. Desai, a senior ICS man, was appointed Special Officer to ascertain what portion of professional grazing reserve could be declared as surplus available for settlement. Desai reported that the forcible occupation of grazing lands by immigrants had already taken place to a large scale, even in predominantly Assamese and tribal areas. His conclusion was that there was no surplus land available for new settlement. Ignoring the report, Saadulla's Muslim League Coalition Government threw select professional grazing reserves open for settling immigrants.[7]

It was this scheme which opened up vast areas of central and western Assam[8] to immigrants and had grave implications for the indigenes, especially for the tribal population who were accustomed to a different mode of agriculture. The tribal farmers lacked proper land documents and were accustomed to using 'unclaimed land' for shifting cultivation. Initially, Saadulla's development scheme met with roadblocks in the form of severe opposition from the Congress which effectively voiced the concerns of the indigenous people. But the Muslim League, under the leadership of Maulana Bhasani,[9] had become more and more strident and continued to press its demand for further opening up of grazing reserves and the abolition of the Line System meant to protect indigenous and tribal land from occupation by immigrants. In its provincial conference held in April 1944 in the lower Assam town of Barpeta,[10] the Muslim League demanded that the immigrants be given land or the Saadulla ministry should resign. Discussing the differences that had cropped up between Saadulla and Bhasani, Amalendu Guha observes:

> Replying to Bhasani's long harangue, Saadulla charged the greedy headmen of immigrant villages, dewanis and matbars, had unceremoniously managed to get for themselves *pattas* for seventy to hundred acres each, with a view to induct sub-tenants... He cited instances of their driving out even Assamese Muslims from newly reclaimed lands. To drive the point home, he drew a parallel with unrestricted Jewish migration to the Arab homeland. He pleaded for protection of Assam's tribals in the plains from the onslaught of more enterprising settlers. Finally, he appealed for support to his policy, since the Line system had already been relaxed to a great deal with a view to its abolition.[11]

Differences with the Muslim League leadership plus continued resistance to his land policy from the Congress, compelled Saadulla to try

to reach a compromise and convene an all-party conference to discuss the issue. But this did not deter Saadulla from bringing in another resolution on the land issue in January 1945 where he tried to arrive at a compromise between the demands of the indigenes and those of the Muslim League. Speaking at the budget session of the Assam Legislative Assembly in March 1945, Gopinath Bardoloi put up a tough fight against the Saadulla government's policy of opening up the reserves and grazing areas to the immigrants. Referring to the anti-tribal policy of the Saadulla government, Bardoloi said: 'The government resolution makes no provision for Tribal Blocks in areas other than places which have been termed as Tribal Blocks. This will make the position of the tribals impossible...the tribal people will have to move to the hills if they require land for settlement and cultivation'. Bardoloi referred to Clause 15 of the Government Resolution which stated:

> The area required for them (the tribals) will be calculated at double the area occupied by the present people in the sub-montane tracts...it will also afford provision to other tribals living outside the area to be defined, who may wish to remove themselves within the tribal belt. *Superfluous lands in the present loosely defined tribal area will be excluded and thrown open for settlement under the planned scheme. In other words, the tribals are not to find land in areas which are now under occupation by them, but they shall have to go to tribal areas...posterity will blame us if we cannot protect the rights of the indigenous people, the tribals.* (Emphasis mine)

Bardoloi was strongly opposed by the Muslim League members and Saadulla went ahead with his land development scheme which led to the opening up of more and more government reserve areas to the immigrants.

In 1946 the Congress was voted to power and one of the first acts of the Bardoloi ministry was to clear the grazing and forest reserves of illegal encroachers[12] as per the tripartite agreement of March 1945. But resistance from the immigrants and the fear of reprisals on Assamese villages forced the government to go slow. Hence, the alienation of tribal land continued. However, within a year of independence, the Bardoloi ministry, in a bid to prevent further alienation of tribal land, amended the Assam Land Revenue Regulations in 1886, and created reserved tribal belts in different regions with the aim of protecting the tribal people from competition from non-tribals and mainly immigrants. Ten tribal belts and 23 tribal blocks were constituted and it was hoped that

the measure would prove to be a final check on occupation of tribal land. But in the hands of manipulative officials, most of the provisions were subverted. In the years that followed, continued pressure on land held by the indigenes kept mounting because of immigration from then East Pakistan.

The denial of Sixth Scheduled status for the Bodos, which would have given them constitutional protection when they needed it the most to protect their land and identity, can be seen as one of the primary causes leading to the alienation of tribal land in the post-independence years. The Bangladesh War added to the changing demographic scenario of the state, with several lakhs of immigrants, mostly Bengali-Muslims, staying back in the Brahmaputra Valley. Finally, when the Assam Movement against foreign nationals erupted in 1979, the land issue proved to be the central one. Discussing this, M.S. Prabhakara writes: '...The Land question in Assam is extremely complicated and even more than the "ethnic" dimension and the "threat to identity", it was the land question which invested the Assam agitation with a measure of legitimacy. Vast areas of the state have for years been settled upon and cultivated by people who have no formal claims on the land.'[13]

Thus, Assam has long been caught in the time warp and what we are witnessing today in the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) area is the result of failure as well as unwillingness on the part of the government to act decisively with a political will to put an end to the alienation of tribal land. As for the Assamese middle class, it was too occupied with the language question to give time to the progressive alienation of tribal-land owing to continuous immigration, the strong and unambiguous stand that the Assam Congress leaders took during the Assembly debates before and after Partition notwithstanding.

Any attempt, therefore, to understand the present situation in the BTAD must take into account the fact that the Bodos have been a community long accustomed to shifting cultivation and their transition to settled farming is relatively of recent origin. During the colonial days the Bodo and other Assamese tribal communities were known to be averse to acquiring permanent tenure over land. This lack of formal tenure often made them appear as encroachers on government forest land and helped the immigrant non-tribal peasants to permanently occupy the land which was once the preserve of the tribal farmer. During the

initial years of migration of peasants from then East Bengal which was actively encouraged by the colonial state to meet its commercial needs, communities like the Bodos could still move within their land and practice their non-commodity production.[14] The colonial administration wasn't happy with such cultivators because they practiced temporary cultivation and were unwilling to pay land revenue. But as the flow on migration increased in the immediate years before and after independence, tribal land was increasingly acquired by non-tribal immigrants who secured permanent tenure. Therefore, it was a losing battle for the Bodos who were pitted against the sedentary farmers who started raising cash crops.

The present clashes between the Bodos and the immigrant Muslim settlers have a long history.[15] Ever since the movement for a separate Bodoland started in the March 1987,[16] the question of Bodo identity has been linked to land and demography. The fight for Bodoland which was attended by a large degree of violence resulted finally in the Bodo Accord of 2003 for the creation of the BTC and the BTAD which politically empowered the Bodos within certain territorial limits in which they were clearly a minority, constituting just around 30 per cent of the total population of the BTAD area. The creation of a particular ethnic homeland without ensuring the constitutional rights of the other communities living in the region was the beginning of the conflict lines leading to repeated clashes between the Bodos and other communities, especially the Santhals and the immigrant Muslims. It did not take long for the Bodos, after securing a measure of political autonomy, to realize that the demographic equation and, particularly, the land factor were not in their favour. What is important is that the land question was not seriously addressed in the Bodo Accord and encroachment in forest areas continued. Bodo desperation was heightened by the fact that the idea of a homogeneous homeland in a highly heterogeneous polity was a virtual impossibility. This became even more evident as Bodo militancy started ebbing and the non-Bodo communities started consolidating themselves under new banners. All these developments certainly added to the sense of uncertainty among the Bodos regarding their goal of a separate Bodoland and the entire atmosphere was surcharged with suspicion and distrust. A chain of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations by the Bodo and non-Bodo organizations

finally prepared the ground for the present conflagration which has given rise to a massive humanitarian crisis.

A significant aspect of the present outbreak of violence is that it has been confined largely to the Bodo and Muslim communities, a large section of the latter being long-time settlers of the region while there has certainly been significant new additions as well. The resistance put up by organizations like the All Bodo Minority Students Union (ABMSU) made it clear to the Bodo leadership that the major challenge to Bodo aspirations would come from the immigrant Muslim population who seemed to be the most organized of all the non-Bodo communities in the BTAD area. Moreover, the fact that the immigrant Muslim population depended almost solely on land, strengthened the impression that they were the main threat to tribal land and the protected reserves. Added to this was the high-decadal birth rate among the Muslim community which spurred Bodo fears of being further marginalized demographically in their homeland.[17] The distinct failure of the government to curb infiltration from Bangladesh (a fact now admitted, even if much belatedly, by Assam's Chief Minister), the absence of any strict land regulations aimed at preventing further alienation of tribal land, the failure to protect whatever is left of the BTAD region's reserve-forest areas,[18] the dilly-dallying over the question of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) are but a few causes leading to the present humanitarian crisis involving the common masses of both the communities. While restoration of peace and bringing about rehabilitation of the displaced people would naturally be of topmost priority, yet unless the root causes are attended to, the BTAD region is bound to fester. While trying to analyse the present clashes, care must be taken not to see them through the usual Hindu-Muslim lenses as a communal fallout. There are many more subtexts to this than ethnic cleansing, the communal angle, or the Bangladeshi immigrant factor. Writing as way back as 1994, M.S. Prabhakara commented on the 1993 violence: 'To see the violence as merely a calculated move to drive out the non-Bodos and ensure that the Bodos would form a majority in the Bodoland Autonomous Area would not merely be a mechanical reading of a complex situation but also ignoring the hard demographical realties of the region'.[19] In the same article, the author writes: ' ... the antagonism towards aliens of migrant origin (was) grounded in everyday experience of tension arising over the very fact of such settlements which came up (and in

some cases were set up) quite illegally in areas officially designated as tribal belts and blocks'. The Bodo struggle needs to be seen as the story of resistance (however despicable this might appear to some because of the successive waves of violence it has triggered) of a small ethnic nationality trying to preserve its identity which is so inextricably tied up with land. Today the Bodo community is seized by an element of uncertainty and insecurity and, in many senses the attendant violence is a reflection of this.

The build up to the present violence began with a string of protest programmes taken up by the non-Bodo organizations against what they have been long describing as the discriminatory policies of the BTAD administration against the other communities residing in the BTAD area. The Bodo leadership has been repeatedly accused of encouraging a policy of intimidation and extortion against non-Bodo sections of the population. It is significant that as along as Bodo militancy was at its height, efforts by non-Bodo communities to organize themselves did not meet with much success. But, once militancy started ebbing with even the dreaded National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) faction led by Ranjan Daimary[20] going in for a ceasefire and willing to open talks with the Government of India, the non-Bodo communities drew courage to organize themselves under the umbrella organization called the Non-Bodo Protection Forum (NBPF) which included representatives from the ABMSU, the All Assam Koch–Rajbongshi Students Union, Bengali Students Federation, the All Assam Gorkha Students Union, and the All Assam Tea Tribes Students Union. Amongst these components, the ABMSU which was a wing of the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU) and which represented the Muslim settlers, was an influential presence.

Beginning with May 2012, the NBPF initiated a series of protest programmes and made clear its opposition to the creation of a separate Bodoland state as demanded by the Bodo Peoples Front (BPF)[21] and other Bodo organizations. Along with the NBPF, the Koch–Rajbongshis, one of the major non-Bodo communities of the BTAD, too upped their ante for a separate state and ST status. They held huge rallies at Bongaigaon and other places on 22 May. Within a week of this, the ABMSU called for a 24-hour Kokrajhar bandh on May 29 to protest against the administration's refusal to allow an Idgah maidan on government forest land near the Chakrasila Wildlife sanctuary. During the ABMSU bandh, there

was widescale violence and several government and public vehicles were torched and scores of people injured. In response to this, several Bodo organizations led by the ex-BLT Welfare Society and a faction of the NDFB held a mass rally on May 30 to protest the violence indulged in by the ABMSU and to reiterate the demand for the clearing of encroachers from forest land in the Bedlangmeri area. All this set the stage for a full-scale confrontation between the Bodo organizations and the immigrant Muslim settlers now led by the ABMSU. The following month (June) was marked by isolated incidents in different parts of the BTAD, with the ABMSU blockading the national highway to be followed by a massive rally held by the BPF to press for the demand for a separate state. As opposition to such a demand mounted from the non-Bodo organizations and primarily from the ABMSU, tension between the two communities kept on mounting and on 6 July two activists of the ABMSU were shot at in the Kokrajhar district. This was followed by the killing of four former BLT cadres in the Joypur area of Kokrajhar on 20 July. With this the mayhem may be said to have begun. Swift reprisals were carried out by the Bodo community and the violence soon spread to Chirang and Baksa as well as the adjoining Dhubri district. Within a week, scores of people were killed and nearly four lakhs were displaced. This has easily been one of the most massive displacements in the country's post-independence history.[22] Interestingly, this time the violence did not affect the Udalguri district which had been witness to large-scale riots between Muslim immigrants and Bodos and other communities in 2008 when over 70 people were killed and over a lac rendered homeless. One explanation is that during the present spell of violence the initiative has been taken by the former BLT rebels while the predominantly Christian NDFB factions have not been so proactive.[23] Both the Muslim and Bodo refugees in the camps maintained that in most cases the houses were burnt but large-scale killings did not take place. They also said that the nature of the violence was unlike that of a communal clash involving two communities. Rather, there seemed to be a pattern behind the entire violence as far as the burning down of both Muslim and Bodo villages was concerned. It is an undisputed fact that much of the violence could have been prevented had the security forces promptly moved into the affected areas. But there was a clear administrative failure in the deployment of forces and this resulted in the total erosion of confidence on the part of the people in the administration, and the

resultant fear and panic in which thousands from both the communities fled their homes. This partly explains the huge numbers of refugees in the camps. Another significant aspect of the present violence in the BTAD area is that, by and large, Assamese and Bengali-Hindus, Nepalis, Koch–Rajbongshis, and Adivasis have not been affected. There has clearly been selective torching of houses by both sides and only occasionally have the other communities been caught in the violence. While all these communities are represented in the NBPF and one of its most vocal leaders is an Assamese caste-Hindu, yet the more organized group within the umbrella organization is the ABMSU which has emerged as the representative of the immigrant Muslim community.

The rehabilitation process has been severely affected by the contrasting positions adopted by the Bodo and the immigrant Muslim leaderships. The former has been steadfastly asserting that among the Muslim refugees in the camps there is a sizable section of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and the citizenship bona fides of these people must be verified before they are rehabilitated. The latter has been insisting that rehabilitation must precede all such verification. The state government is obviously in a bind and cannot decide either way.[24] Relations between the Congress and its coalition partner the BPF have already been frayed and any strong stand in support of the migrants would certainly add to the divide. As it is there are signs of the Bodo political opinion moving away from the Congress, with parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) trying to make inroads. On the other hand, any decision in favour of the Bodos would finally alienate the huge Muslim votebank of the Congress. At the same time, speedy rehabilitation without verifying the citizenship status of the camp inmates is bound to been seen by both the Bodos and the Assamese as a surrender to the immigrant lobby. But what should really be of concern is that any attempt to speed up the rehabilitation process of the Muslim settlers without confidence-building measures between the two communities and proper security infrastructure in the affected areas, would invariably lead to further attacks on the immigrant population. This has been borne out by past experience and the recent attacks on a group of immigrant Muslims who were returning to their homes from the camp at Chirang signify that the former Bodo militant cadres are bent on forcing the displaced people to stay on in the camps and not return to their homesteads.[25]

That rehabilitation is not going to be an easy process can be seen from the earlier instances of violence and displacement in the area.[26]

Though the movement for Bodo autonomy has been going on since the 1980s and violence against civilians and state property was quite rampant,[27] yet it was only from the 1990s onwards that the Muslims and other communities living in the region that was being claimed for a separate Bodoland began to be targeted and quit notices were issued to the non-tribal population in many areas, followed by isolated violence. This was seen as part of a wider plan to create a more or less homogeneous Bodo homeland where the Bodos were clearly in a minority. But the odds were heavily placed against the Bodos who could perhaps be described as the least economically developed among the plains tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the first few decades following independence, the Bodo peasants had been progressively pushed out of their land by non-Bodo settlers[28] amongst which the Muslim immigrant peasants constituted the largest single group. Tribal land in the tribal belts and blocks was continuously usurped by rich and middle non-Bodo peasants and the encroachment of forest areas, with the connivance of a corrupt bureaucracy, also continued apace. It needs to be noted that the violence against other communities escalated only after the Bodo Movement was hijacked by the militant armed groups initially led by the UTNLF and the Bodo Security Force and subsequently by the BLT and the NDFB. The first major attacks by the Bodos on Muslim settlers took place in October 1993 in western Assam to be followed by the burning down of over 60 villages of old Muslim settlers in the Barpeta district in early 1994, including an attack on a refugee camp which claimed some 90 lives. In May–June 1996 the Santhals were targeted and more than 200 people were killed and some 2,00,000 were displaced. Further clashes took place in 1998 and 1999 when ethnic violence displaced 756 villages of Kokrajhar district, of which 196 were revenue villages, 25 were recognized forest villages, and 535 were encroached forest villages.[29] More than 50 people lost their lives and over 80,000 were displaced. It needs to be noted that during all these clashes, a large number of Bodo people were also displaced when their villages were burnt down primarily in retaliatory violence. The year 2008 saw clashes between the Bodos and Muslims in Udalguri and Darrang districts, with

more than 100 people losing their lives and over 1,50,000 displaced. A significant feature of that wave of violence was that the other non-Bodo communities had distanced themselves from the Muslims, a process which is also to be seen in the present violence. In earlier clashes, apart from the Bodos and Muslims, other communities such as the non-tribal Assamese, Koch–Rajbongshis, Bengali-Hindus, and Rabhas were also caught in the violence and displaced. Thus, in the course of time, the brunt of the Bodo anger and frustration was targeted against the immigrant Muslim peasants who happened to be concentrated in certain areas and was also posing a challenge in demographic terms.[30] But it needs to be noted that the flow of immigrant Muslims into the BTAD area has also been linked to the developmental programmes in the form of road building and other infrastructure that have been imitated by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and which needed cheap labour. Added to this has been the rather sudden rise of a Bodo middle class in the BTAD area which necessitated share-croppers and peasant labour to till the land that belonged to this class. And, in the majority of cases, this was provided by the immigrant Muslims.

Just as the Bodo–Muslim violence has led to the consolidation of Muslim opinion throughout the state, similarly it has brought together the different streams of Bodo politics—both populist and militant. As trouble in the BTAD mounted, one could see a unanimity of view amongst the different Bodo organizations and outfits ranging from the ABSU and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) to the former BLT-led Bodo Peoples Front and the two factions of the NDFB. This coming together is bound to bring about a major change in Bodo politics. Another marked feature of the recent developments has been the coming closer of the Bodo organizations to what may be termed as Assamese mainstream politics.[31] Whereas ever since the agitation for a separate Bodoland began, the prime target of the Bodo leadership has been the Assamese middle class and its hegemonistic ambitions.[32] Recently the former seems to have made several overtures towards the latter. Bodo organizations and leaders have called for the implementation of Clause 10 of the Assam Accord[33] and the updating of the National Register of Citizens[34]—something which they had been indifferent to all these years. There seems to be an eagerness amongst Bodo organizations to come closer to their Assamese counterparts in their common fight against illegal

immigration from Bangladesh. But, interestingly, the response of the Assamese 'national' organizations has been rather lukewarm. The Assamese dilemma clearly springs from the fact that over the years a section of influential Assamese public opinion has been favouring the inclusion of the immigrant Muslims within the expanding parameters of the Assamese nationality. On the contrary, Assamese irredentism and over-zealousness in protecting their language and identity eventually resulted in alienating the plains-tribal communities of which the Bodos were a major constituent. Assamese social leaders and intellectuals have been maintaining that the immigrant Muslims or Na-Asamiya (neo-Assamese) who have been returning Assamese as their mother tongue are now an integral part of the Assamese nationality. Therefore, in the event of a clash between the Bodos and the neo-Assamese Muslims, the latter would naturally be expected to bank on the support of the indigenous Assamese. The present clashes have, therefore, revealed the dilemma of the Assamese leadership. This partly explains the lack of stridency on the part of organizations like the AASU, the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS) or the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chattra Parishad (AJYCP) during the recent clash. Sections of the Assamese press and electronic media seemed to have almost abandoned the na-Asamiya or neo-Assamese Muslim overnight and started referring to them as Bengali-speaking Muslims! Such a development reminds one of a particular phase in the Assam Movement (1979–85) when the Muslim community as a whole, including the indigenous Assamese-Muslims, was considered a danger to the Assamese nation-building process. A similar situation seems to be evolving today with certain sections within the Assamese community trying to interpret the violence in BTAD as one between the indigenes and Bangladeshis or the foreign nationals. Such a position almost totally marginalizes the neo-Assamese Muslim who happens to form a major plank of the Assamese nationality. This approach would invariably lead to distrust and animosity and widen the gap between the Assamese and the neo-Assamese Muslim while at the same time further aggravating the identity crisis of the Assamese indigenous Muslims. Polarization along religious lines would bring about major faultlines in the otherwise religiously tolerant Assamese society. Unfortunately, such a process seems to have begun. As a result of this, Assamese public opinion though sympathetic to the Bodo position in relation to illegal immigration, is still quite cautious about extending unqualified sup-

port for the Bodos. This is particularly so because of the large number of Assamese living in the BTAD area who are opposed to the Bodo Accord.[35] Added to this is the increasingly uncertain position of the Assamese civil society regarding the status of neo-Assamese Muslims of the BTAD. In this highly complex scenario relating to the Assamese nationality, rightist parties are trying to communalize the entire issue along the Hindu–Muslim lines. But given the broadly secular nature of the Assamese national institutions, Assamese concern about illegal infiltration from Bangladesh and the consequent demographic change cannot be expected to translate itself into simple communal equations.

Therefore, those who are trying to portray the present crisis in the BTAD as a Hindu–Muslim communal clash are either not acquainted with the Assamese social scenario or are consciously trying to bring about polarization along religious lines. But even in the latter case, it needs to be kept in mind that some 12 per cent of the Bodos are Christians while the majority is followers of the Brahma sect and traditional Bathou religion.

Finally, whatever the present equations, however repulsive the violence and the magnitude of the human tragedy, the fact remains that the present highly tragic situation in the BTAD region is the outcome of wrong policies which have been pursued as part of a political agenda from the years immediately following independence till the present times—all resulting in the marginalizing of the plains-tribal communities and dispossessing them of their rights to land and a distinct way of life linked inextricably with it. If the peaceful and 'indolent' Bodos are today being accused of violence against the other communities residing in the BTAD area, then part of the blame certainly lies with the cruel historical process aided and abetted by successive governments since the colonial days.

What is urgently required at this present juncture is strong and effective steps to prevent further alienation of tribal land and forest reserves coupled with measures to protect the constitutional rights of the other communities in the BTAD area. This can certainly be achieved through a meaningful dialogue. All the violence attributed to the Bodo people cannot take away from the fact that theirs is a struggle to keep their land and identity. What course this struggle eventually takes remains to be seen. Demands are being raised for the dissolution of the BTC and

the imposition of President's rule in the state. In such a situation one can only hope that the experiment at bringing back the militants into the democratic process, however flawed it might be, does not end in failure. For, such a development is bound to have frighteningly grave implications for the entire northeastern region.

Notes

1. The Colonization Scheme which had been initiated by the British officials began in 1928 when large areas of Nowgong district to be followed by Barpeta and Mangaldai subdivisions were opened up primarily to Muslim immigrants. According to Amalendu Guha 'during the six years preceding 1936, as many as 59 grazing, forest and village reserves had been thrown open in Nowgong under the Colonisation Scheme for settling the immigrants ... the land-hungry immigrants, segregated and pitted against all odds, never appreciated the Assamese point of view. If all men were equal in the eyes if Allah, why should thousands of acres of land remain waste, particularly when men in search of a livelihood and *lebensraum* were available to them to turn into smiling fields? ... They wanted the Line system to go', pp. 209–10.

2. The Line System was first mooted in 1916 and adopted in 1920. It was an administrative measure aimed against the occupation of land belonging to the indigenous people by the immigrants. The clash of interests began when the immigrants started moving into areas held by the autochthones from their initial riverine bases. Under the Line System, a line was drawn in those districts which were under pressure from immigrants so that they could be settled in segregated areas specified for their exclusive settlement. But continuous encroachment by immigrants into lands earmarked for the local Assamese people ultimately made the Line System virtually infructuous.

3. The clauses relating to land settlement of tribal people were quite vague. Though it was agreed that steps would be initiated to defend the Line System, and settlement would be given to landless tribals 'after taking into account the condition' of these people, yet no specific guideline or time frame was spelt out. The Tribal League has also been referred to as the 'Plains Tribal League'.

4. The majority of Congress MLAs were in jail because of the Quit India Movement.

5. The Bengal Legislative Council passed a motion on 16 July 1943, calling upon the Government of India to take immediate steps to remove all restrictions imposed by the Assam government on the land-hungry, emi-

grant cultivators from Bengal. See Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p. 281.

6. Wavell termed it as the 'Grow More Muslims' policy.

7. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, pp. 281–2.

8. Central and western Assam is today in the grip of Bodo–Muslim violence.

9. Abdul Hamid Khan, better known as Maulana Bhasani, was a peasant leader of East Bengal but soon emerged as a influential leader of the Bengali-Muslim immigrants in Assam. Was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937 and as president of the provincial Muslim League mounted a series of agitations for the withdrawal of the Line System and the opening of the tribal belts and blocks to immigrant peasants. In February 1947 Bhasani planned a series of marches against the Line System as part of the Civil Disobedience programme of the All India Muslim League. But when the possibility of Assam being included in Pakistan receded, the move fizzled out.

10. By the 1940s the Barpeta subdivision of lower Assam was emerging as a stronghold of immigrant Muslims. In 1911 Muslims constituted 0.1 per cent of the population of Barpeta subdivision; by 1941, they constituted nearly 49 per cent.

11. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, pp. 282–3.

12. Primarily post-1937 encroachers.

13. M.S. Prabhakara, 'Land, the Source of all Trouble', *Hindu*, Madras, 15 July 1987.

14. For a discussion of the two land systems refer to Arupjyoti Saikia, 'What Ails Western Assam?', *Seven Sisters Post*, Guwahati, 10 August 2012.

15. As early as 1989, United Minority Front legislators in the Assam Assembly accused the ruling Asom Gana Parishad of inciting the Muslim settlers against the Bodo tribals.

16. The Bodo Movement for autonomy and separate statehood has passed through several stages. Initially, under the leadership of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) the demand was for a homeland for the plain tribal communities of central and western Assam inhabiting the north bank of the Brahmaputra. But owing to reservations expressed by the Mishing and Rabha communities, the demand got focused on an exclusive homeland for the Bodos who were the largest plain-tribal group although clearly not in a majority in the area earmarked by the agitators for a separate Bodoland. Under the leadership of the ABSU which had the support of the militant United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) the movement acquired an increasing violent turn with government buildings. Schools and bridges destroyed and scores of civilians, both Bodo and non-

Bodo being killed. Following the infructous accord of 1993, Bodo militancy took on new wings with the formation of organizations like the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF/BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). There is evidence to suggest that the Central government under the Congress encouraged Bodo separatism in order to create difficulties for the AGP government of the state. Finally, with a change of government in Delhi, an Accord was arrived at between the BLT and the GOI which paved the way for the amendment of the Sixth Schedule and the creation of the BTAD with electoral reservations for the Bodo community in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTD) which was given a large range of powers minus law and order which remained with the state government. With 30 of the 46 seats in the BTC reserved for STs (Bodos alone in this case), and only 5 for non-tribal communities and another 5 open seats, the other communities which constituted almost 70 per cent of the population felt left out of the democratic process. Though the Accord provided for the protection of the land rights of the non-tribals, and did not bar any citizen from 'acquiring land either by way of inheritance, allotment, settlement or by way of transfer if such citizens were eligible for such bonafide acquisition of land within the BTC area', the clause was later on seen by the Bodos as a ploy to continue acquisition of tribal land while the non-Bodos felt that this particular clause was not respected by the Bodo leadership.

17. That demographic change was a major concern was reflected in Clause 8 of the Memorandum of Settlement between the Government of India and the ABSU signed in February 1993, which stated that 'the BAC shall, within the laws of the land, take steps to protect the demographic complexion of the areas falling within its jurisdiction'. Though this clause does not figure in the Bodo Accord of 2003, yet it points to the demographic challenge that small nationalities in the northeastern region have been facing primarily from immigration.

18. Though exact figures regarding occupation of tribal belts and blocks and government reserve land are not available, it is a known fact that over the years there has been continuous encroachment. In figures released by the sate government as way back as 1986, immigrant Muslims, former tea-garden workers, Nepalis, and non-tribal Assamese constituted almost half of the total number of settlers in the 25 forest divisions of the state where some 1,74,489 hectares were under occupation.

19. Prabhakara, *Hindu*, Madras, 2 August 1994.

20. It was this faction that has been held responsible for the highly coordinated bomb blasts which shook Guwahati and several other towns on the 31 October 2008 which claimed scores of lives.

21. The (BPF) which is a coalition partner of the Congress government led by Tarun Gogoi is made up of former BLT members.

22. Till date official figures put the number of killed at 97, with the immigrant Muslim settlers bearing the brunt of the violence. But many Bodos have also lost their lives and over a lakh have been displaced.

23. Right from its beginning, the Bodo Movement has been marked by a Christian-non-Christian divide.

24. Even the state government has, in so many words, accepted the presence of illegal migrants in some of the camps and the Chief Minister has gone on record saying that his government would provide relief to foreign nationals but the question of rehabilitation did not arise.

25. Muslim and Adivasi (Santhal) victims of earlier rounds of violence in 1993, 1996, and 1998 are still lodged in camps in Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar..

26. For details about displacement figures from 1993 onwards, refer to 'Conflict-Induced Internal Displacees and their Security: A Case Study of Lower Assam' by Subhash Barman in Akhil Ranjan Dutta (ed.), *Human Security in North-East India: Issues and Policies* (Guwahati, 2011).

27. Up to April 1989, for instance, as many as 150 civilians were killed and these included those gunned down in fratricidal strife between the supporters of the ABSU and the PTCA as well as state-government employees and school teachers.

28. These settlers included, apart from the immigrant Muslims, non-tribal Assamese, Adivasis, and Nepalis.

29. Subhash Barman, op. cit., p. 227.

30. It may be recalled that the growing tension between the immigrant Muslims and the tribals was highlighted as way back as 1989 when during a session of the Assam Assembly, a United Minorities Front member accused the AGP of inciting the Muslim settlers against the Bodo tribals.

31. Recently, BTC chief Hagrama Mohiliary announced a grant of several lakhs of rupees for the setting up of centres at the initiative of the ASS for Bodo and Assamese language training in the BTAD area.

32. During the Bodo Movement, scores of Assamese civilians, school-teachers, petty businessmen were targeted and Assamese peasants in many Bodo-majority areas were compelled to sell off their land at throwaway prices.

33. Clause 10 of the Assam Accord reads: 'It will be ensured that the relevant laws for protection of encroachment on government lands and lands in the tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down in such laws'.

34. A long-standing demand of the AASU and other Assamese organizations.

35. Though Clause 4 (3) of the Bodo Accord contains safeguards for the 'settlement rights, transfer and inheritance of property etc. of non-tribals', yet the general complaint of the non-tribal population has been that their citizenship rights have been totally marginalized by the accord and that they have been reduced to a second-class citizen status.

IV The Adivasi Question

Introduction

The Adivasis[1] of Assam who constitute more about 15 per cent of the state's population today have always lived at the fringes of the Assamese society. However, the tea-garden labour community, has, of late, emerged as an important constituent in the region's politics. With a population estimated at some 40 lakhs[2], this community has long been treated primarily as a votebank by the ruling Congress party. Having been subjected to some of the worst forms of exploitation during colonial rule, the position of the tea-labour community has not seen any major improvements in post-1947 India with provisions like the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 still to be fully implemented.[3] Despite a co-coordinated trade union movement and the emergence of pressure groups in the form of tea tribes/Adivasi students/youth associations, the community suffers from the lowest HDI indices of all the communities of the state. The literacy and health scenario amongst the Adivasis (both within the tea gardens as well as outside) is dismal and every year hundreds of workers fall prey to waterborne diseases. The tea-labour community has been demanding ST status, a move which is being resisted by the All Assam Tribal Sangha which feels that this would eat into their quota of reservations. With low literacy and high unemployment rates,[4] it is but natural that certain sections of the youth belonging to this community have taken to the politics of the gun.[5] But the general trend amongst this community has been to exercise its influence in the

electoral politics of the state because of its consolidated numbers. Being increasingly seen as a major constituent of the Assamese nationality,[6] the tea tribes/Adivasis have been able to carve for themselves a niche in the state's political scenario. But the dividends that they have been securing in the political field have not been translated into social or economic gains. Hence, the ferment within the community continues. It is in this context that one sees the growing influence of Maoist ideas among some sections of Adivasi youth. The Adivasis are bound to play a cardinal role in the sociopolitical scene of Assam in the years to come.

Notes

1. Generally, the term 'tea tribes' refers primarily to those working in the tea gardens. Those who left the tea estates and settled as small cultivators and labourers in *bastis* in different parts of the state (primarily in Lower Assam) are known as ex-tea garden tribes or Adivasis. The term 'Adivasi', which till recently applied to only those ex-tea garden tribes living in bastis in the Lower Assam districts, is gradually becoming more inclusive to include both those working in the tea gardens as well as those outside. Nonetheless, in Assam there is a divide between the 'tea tribes' working in the estates of Upper Assam and the ex-tea garden tribes or Adivasis living in the bastis of Lower Assam districts. While the latter came chiefly came from Jharkhand, the former came from other parts of the country such as Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, and West Bengal. Studies have shown that the tea-garden labour community of Upper Assam generally identify themselves as Assamese whereas those belonging to Lower Assam are more prone to assert their Jharkhandi roots. However, attempts to actively revive the Jharkhand connection have not met with much success, especially because such assertion has added to the 'outsider' image of the Adivasis. Moreover, studies have also shown that in Assam, unlike in neighbouring North Bengal, the tea tribes working in the tea gardens, despite much exploitation, possess some degree of economic security which their counterparts living in the bastis totally lack, although the vast majority of the latter also depends on tea gardens for their sustenance [Fernandes, Bobora, and Bharali, *Primary Education of Plantation Labourers in Assam* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2003)]. Despite these faultlines, attempts are on to bring all the tea-garden and ex-tea-garden tribes, the plantation workers and the basti dweller, under a common Adivasi platform. The success of such attempts will depend not on revivalist and back-to-the-roots appeals but on a wider class-based economic agenda for the general upliftment of a

people who have been cribbed, cabined, and confined for generations for the benefit of an exploitative State machinery, first under the colonial rulers and then under the Indian state.

2. Although tea tribe leaders claim their population to be some sixty lakhs, conservative sources say that out of a total population of some 35 to 40 lakhs, half are basti dwellers.

3. The Plantation Labour Act of 1951, which came because of the efforts of the Gandhian Congressman Omeo Kumar Das, was the first legislation of its kind which laid down certain guidelines for the tea-garden labour to be followed by the management of the tea gardens.

4. Unlike in olden days, the tea management now depends on a large percentage of casual labourers who are recruited on a purely temporary basis during the plucking season. These workers are denied even the minimum privileges which are enjoyed by the regular workers.

5. Following the attacks on Adivasis in the 1990s in the newly-created Bodoland Territorial Council, several anti-State armed groups came into being. Prominent amongst these are the Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam, Birsa Commando Force, Santhal Tiger Force, Adivasi People's Army, and Adivasi National Liberation Army. Their demands include the granting of ST status to the Adivasis and a rehabilitation package for the riot-hit Adivasi population living in refugee camps in Assam since the late 1990s. All these groups have given up arms and are now engaged in negotiations with New Delhi.

6. This has been discussed in the essay, 'Immigration and Identity Transformation in Assam'.

V Assam Tea
A Bitter Brew*

On 30 May 2003 irate workers of a tea estate in Assam's Sonitpur district hacked and burnt to death the estate's deputy manager and senior assistant manager. Trade union leaders from the tea industry have unequivocally condemned the incident. But they have also drawn

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attention to the fact that tea-garden managements in Assam have been systematically ignoring the demands of the workers, especially for welfare measures. Successive governments in Assam have failed to force managements to implement the Plantations Labour Act of 1951. Managements now claim that the industry is passing through a recession, but during the tea boom of the 1990s the same managements did not share a miniscule amount of their profits with the workers. Irate workers of the Sapoi tea estate under the Kanoi group of gardens in Assam's Sonitpur district hacked and burnt to death the deputy manager Anthony D. Unger and the senior assistant manager Susmit Kumar Singh. The incident was the direct fallout of the management's decision to handover some workers to the police who had been involved in securing 'illegal' power connections in their quarters. When the police arrested nine young men for alleged power theft, several hundred tea workers gheraoed the two deputy managers and demanded that they get the arrested ones released. When their demands were turned down, the agitated workers fell upon Singh and Unger and lynched them. They then burnt the two bodies within the tea estate itself. According to some reports, the workers allegedly poured kerosene on the unconscious officials and set fire to them. The estate's Tea Protection Force unit, far from attempting to rescue the officials, entered their barracks and bolted their doors. When the police went to investigate the incident, the workers attacked the police party and in the subsequent lathicharge and firing, one worker, Thomas Thangari was killed and several injured. A police sub-inspector was also badly injured in the attack by the workers, 25 of whom were subsequently arrested by the police. While the tea-estate management declared an immediate lockout, the deputy commissioner of Sonitpur district has ordered a magisterial inquiry into the incident.

What has unnerved both the management and the government is the unprecedented fury of the workers. But for labour strikes during bonus time, the tea-estate workers in Assam are not known to be particularly aggressive about their demands, and for decades the management has had pretty smooth sailing. And, if a difficult situation does arise in some estate, a deal is usually struck with the union leadership and all is quiet and placid once again. By and large, the tea-garden worker seems resigned to his lot. Hence, the type of violence that occurred in the Sapoi estate is decidedly something new to the tea scenario of the state.

What has further upset the tea management in the state is that within a fortnight of the Sapoi incident, yet another garden official was waylaid and killed by a small group of workers in the Nandan Ban tea estate in Dibrugarh district. Mukul Dowerah, the young assistant manager, had refused to take back a few retrenched casual workers, when the latter attacked the official with sharp weapons as he was returning from one of his morning rounds in the tea estate. Dowerah died on the way to hospital. What has been a bit unnerving for the tea management is the attitude of the assailants who were quickly picked up by the police. The labourers, all in their early 1920s, seemed least repentant about their action and said that this was their protest against the 'colonial' attitude of the management. One of them said: 'I do not regret what I did. This will be a lesson for the oppressors, who treat us like dogs'.

It is this newfound defiant attitude which has made the 'planter' really panicky. The panic has reached such proportions that in a tea garden situated in eastern Assam, almost the entire managerial staff fled after one of their vehicles was stoned by a group of labourers who were protesting against the management's refusal to accept their elected union. Ever since the trouble began, the focus has not only been on the management's failure to meet the welfare needs of the workers, but also on what is being commonly described as the colonial mindset of the management. In a recent interaction with leading tea executives, the chief minister Tarun Gogoi, whose protection the tea magnates had so avidly sought, made it clear that there is an urgent need to bring about a change in the mindset.

Even a cursory look at the lifestyle of the tea managerial staff in the gardens should be enough to take one back to the colonial days. Time seems to have stood still in most of the tea gardens of Assam when it comes to the relationship between labour and management. The legacy of the colonial days has been cherished and nourished consciously in the gardens even half a century after the end of the Raj. The language of the white sahibs which was a part of the colonial power-structure, has been retained proudly by their modern counterparts and terms like *'chota-hazira'* which have become a part of colonial history now, are lisped with a cultivated accent so jarring to the ears of those who are outside the 'tea' fraternity! There is a scene in Richard Attenborough's 'Gandhi' where Gandhi takes the tray from a servant and pours out the tea for those present at an elite gathering in India. Even today, it is gen-

erally considered to be a part of the 'garden culture' for the silent servant to hold the tray, while the guests ensconced in their sprawling sofas leisurely go about the serious business of making their cuppa tea. The poor chap can't even put the tray down on one of the many sidetables which invariably dot the room, for it is considered improper to do so. This practice of the sahibs has gone down so well with the tea fraternity that even after leaving their plush garden jobs former tea managers are seen sticking to it. Old practices die hard and what better symbol of subservience could there be other than the human tea trolley? This is just one small instance of the way things are in most of the tea gardens.

Despite all the social legislation that has been enacted since independence, the tea-garden 'coolie' is still very much a coolie in the eyes of the management. The killings have naturally evoked wide-scale condemnation throughout the state and the apex body of planters, the Indian Tea Association, has demanded adequate compensation from the state government for the families of the murdered executives. It has also appealed to the State Human Rights Commission for justice. While there is a sense of justified anger among the managerial staff of the gardens, there is also a feeling of resignation. For, it is being pointed out that the ownership often uses the junior executives to carry out their 'unpleasant' decisions, which in plain terms means that the assistant manager or the manager is just a buffer between the management's anti-worker policies and the beleaguered worker. And, quite often it is the junior executives who have to directly face the wrath of the workers. Trade union leaders associated with the tea industry have also been un- equivocal in their condemnation of the incidents of violence. But they have maintained that the killings have nothing to do with organized union activity although the management is trying to show that the violence is part of the union-management tussle. The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha, one of the most powerful workers' bodies in tea, has also strongly condemned the killings and demanded swift action against the offenders. So have leaders like Paban Singh Ghatowar, a prominent trade-unionist and president of the Assam Pradesh Congress. But beneath all this condemnation is the feeling that the management of the gardens has been successively sidetracking some of the demands of the workers, especially in the sphere of welfare measures. For instance, Ghatowar, who himself belongs to the tea-labour community, has said that successive governments in the state have never been able to com-

pel the management to implement the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. Somehow or other the management has always been able to subvert its clauses.

The feeling that the tea management has not been doing enough for the welfare of the plantation workers is shared also by the public at large and has been duly reflected in the press. For example, Guwahati's leading English daily, the *Sentinel*, in one of its editorials, 'An Industry at Risk' (15 June 2002) has commented thus:

> Over the years, the relationship between the management of the tea industry and the workers has not changed a whit though the country has become independent and got rid of its colonial masters. And, given such an anomaly, things are expected to go wrong. The industry has encroached on ceiling surplus land. It has retained the system of regarding a whole lot of workers as casual labourers despite their having worked like regular labourers for years—merely in order to deprive them of their statutory rights as regular employees. About two decades ago, it made compromises with the insurgents that were not consistent with the long-term interests of the industry. So now it has to be thinking of long-term remedies to a rapidly deteriorating management-labour relationship rather than hoping against hope that mere fire-fighting and knee-jerk reactions can save a very important industry of Assam.

The Assam government, on its part, has decided to form district-level coordination committees made up of the divisional commissioners, DCs, SPs, the IGP, concerned officials, and labour leaders of tea gardens in each district. The tea-garden management has already been asked by the district authorities to keep the latter updated about the welfare measures adopted by the industry.

The management, however, is adamant in sticking to its position that the tea industry is going through a period of severe recession and that the workers must share the burden of these difficult days. The Indian Tea Association has been demanding that wages be linked with productivity and that there should be higher disincentives to workers who fail to pluck the mandatory 21 kg of tea leaf which make them eligible to the daily wage of Rs 48.50. At present, for every kilogram of leaf by which the worker falls short of the target, an amount of 27 paise is deducted from the daily wage. Those who pluck more than 21 kg, get paid at the rate of 27 paise per extra kilogram. The management also claims that payment of wages and other benefits to the workers

account for more than 55 per cent of the cost of tea production. The major benefit offered to the workers is in the form of cereals at a highly subsidised rate. Apart from the statutory benefits like bonus, provident fund, gratuity, and so on, the tea worker is supposed to be provided with free housing, medical facilities, fuel for cooking, primary education for the children, adequate arrangement for sanitation, and water supply. With a few exceptions, most of the gardens have little to show in the field of medical facilities and sanitation, while the housing facilities are quite primitive, there being no provision for electricity in the workers' quarters in most gardens. Every year waterborne diseases take a heavy toll of life in Assam's tea gardens, bad sanitation and the lack of drinking water being the chief causes. Only a few years ago several hundred tea workers of gardens in eastern Assam died of gastroenteritis which took on an epidemic form. Lack of drinking water in the tea-garden housing 'lines' was the main cause of the epidemic. Several leading trade unions had then organized protest demonstrations throughout the state to highlight the shocking state of sanitation and medical facilities in most of the gardens affected by the epidemic. Commenting on the gastroenteritis epidemic in the tea gardens, a leading Guwahati daily wrote:

> ... there is absolutely no concern in the authorities of the gardens that their labourers are dying by the hundreds, and that this has become an annual affair only because they have refused to provide the elementary civic and health services to the labourers even though they have kept the secessionists and gun-toting anti-nationals in their payroll, the annual bill for which will be several times more than what would have cost them to provide for the services of the labourers ... if the bills for paying the terrorists do not bother them because it is a minuscule fraction of what they earn annually, their refusal to pay for even much less than that only reveals the criminal apathy and neglect by them of the interests of the labourers ... The government of Assam must book the criminals forthwith and send across the message that no authority will get away with the deaths of hundreds of people for their criminal neglect. (The *Sentinel*, 25 June 1998)

But no message went across to the tea management which tried to shirk its responsibility by putting all the blame on the government. Conditions in the gardens' hospitals have remained more or less the same even after this epidemic. In most cases, these hospitals are there

because they have to be there as per the regulations. About primary education the less said the better, the literacy rate among the tea workers being abysmally low at some 10 per cent. It could be even lower among the women workers who make up the major plucking force. At a recent press meet, the Assam education minister described the education scenario in the tea gardens as grim and said that there is not a single lower-primary school in about 15 per cent of tea garden areas although the management is bound to provide schooling facilities. Moreover, even in those gardens where there are such schools, these are virtually non-functional. Thus, there are enough loopholes in the Plantations Labour Act for the management to circumvent its provisions.

The tea workers have been blamed today for being insensitive to the problems of recession faced by the industry today. But, during the boom period in the 1990s, the workers did not enjoy any share of the profit. It must be kept in mind that the minimum daily wage of the tea worker has been kept at Rs 48.50 chiefly because of the benefits that the management is supposed to provide its permanent workers. If the management had been sincere in providing these benefits, the present situation would never have arisen. In recent years, the management has been successively reducing its permanent workforce and seeking more and more temporary labour because it has no responsibilities for the latter. Of the estimated workforce of approximately 10 lakhs, almost half is made up of temporary labour. The management maintains that since permanent workers do not fulfil their obligations, it is compelled to go seek temporary labour during the plucking seasons. The management has been citing the decline in production of tea in Assam in recent years as proof of its argument. But, the relative decline in recent years cannot be attributed to labour productivity alone. Other factors must also be taken into account. There has been little of consistent effort on the part of the management to improve labour efficiency, modernize the infrastructure of the tea industry, bring in new areas under cultivation, and improve the yield per hectare.

All this has resulted in a steady decline in the yield per hectare over the past three to four years. Although the management has cited non-availability of land for expansion of tea and floods and erosion in some areas as major reasons for the low yield, it has not taken any concrete steps to improve the health and living conditions of the workers so that work efficiency increases. Studies on the state of health of the tea

workers have revealed that malnutrition and disease are only too common among the tea workers and a large number of man-days are lost because of sickness. Despite all this, the production of tea in the state touched an all-time high of 460 million kilograms in 1998. This was followed by a decline in the subsequent year and a subsequent rise to 451 million kilograms in the year 2000. In 2001 Assam produced some 450 million kilograms of tea, a decline of some one million kilograms over the previous year. (The production of tea in the country as a whole registered a rise of 7.23 million kilograms over 2000, mainly because of increased output in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.) But such cyclic fluctuations are quite common in tea, with one or two good years being followed by average yields in the succeeding years. This was so in the 1950s and 1960s as well. What however has been worrying the tea industry is the escalation in production costs, the decline in prices and the fall in exports. While cost of production per kilogram of tea has gone up by Rs 16.75 in 2001 over 1998, the decline in price realization in the last three years has been said to be as high as Rs 12 per kilogram of tea. Prices touched a high of Rs 79.03 per kilogram in 1999 to be followed by a steady decline in the succeeding years. Also, exports of tea showed a 14.44 per cent decline during the financial year 2001–02. This decline has been attributed chiefly to the lower imports by Russia and the CIS countries and the greater international demand for tea from Sri Lanka and Kenya. But imports from Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan showed a steady rise.

Therefore, it would be wrong to view the present period of stagnation as a permanent feature. For, there is every chance of the situation improving. Present trends indicate the further opening up of tea exports to Pakistan and the increase in demand in the domestic market. It appears that the present hype about a severe recession hitting the tea industry is partly aimed at securing further concessions from the government as also to deflect public attention from the actual state of the tea workers. Moreover, serious allegations have also been made by the government that some 3,050 hectares of the state's prime agricultural land is under the illegal occupation of tea. According to the state revenue minister, the Assam government has decided to bring these illegally encroached lands under revenue control by charging a penal rate of 200 per cent more than the prevailing market rate of the state. He also declared that many of the large tea gardens have been unwilling to

produce their land records, saying that these are in London! (Or perhaps in Kolkata where the head offices of most of the big gardens are situated.) British planters had taken advantage of the Waste Land Rules of 1838 to take over thousands of acres of agricultural land without paying anything and almost revenue free. Tea was planted only in a small part of this land. For instance, of the 7,00,000 acres occupied by the tea owners in 1870–1, tea was actually grown only on 56,000 acres accounting for just 8 per cent of the total land. After independence, no effort was made to take over this excess land from the tea gardens. On the other hand, further encroachment took place in many areas.

Today approximately 2.31 lakh hectares of land are under tea cultivation, but the actual area held by the gardens is much more. As such, it is not surprising that official estimates put the figure of land encroached upon by the tea gardens at well over 3,000 hectares. When in 1978, the state's first non-Congress government led by Golap Borbora enacted legislation permitting the establishment of small tea gardens in the state, many had thought that with ordinary farmers intruding upon the more than exclusive preserve of tea, the colonial ethos and the elitist stance surrounding the industry would ultimately disappear. Hundreds of small gardens mushroomed throughout the state and today there are some 25,000 small tea growers with an investment of Rs 400 crore. Tea is grown now by small growers in an area of approximately 90,000 hectares. Along with this, there has been a phenomenal growth in bought-leaf factories and from just five such factories in 1997, today the figure stands at almost a hundred. The total production from these bought-leaf factories is around 50 million kilograms and their investment is some Rs 200 crore. This is a totally new phenomenon in the tea scenario of the state. As per the Assam government's regulation, one is deemed a 'small tea grower' if the area under tea cultivation does not exceed 4 hectares (30 bighas). The Tea Board, however, has fixed the limit at 10 hectares. But this 'plebeianisation' of tea growing in the state has not been able to make any perceptible dent on the colonial ethos which still prevails in most of the large well-established gardens where a deliberate attempt is made to nourish the past when tea vignettes were made up of the exploits of the brave planter sahib. his evening scotch, and his tales of real or fictitious adventures in the jungles. The small tea growers are very much outside the ethos of that tea circle in Assam. During the British days, the tea planters had a fully armed protection

force of their own which they used not so much for their protection as to keep the recalcitrant coolie in check. This force was naturally disbanded after independence. Today, some quarters are not happy with the work of the Tea Protection Force and have suggested that the government allow the planters to arm themselves! Such a viewpoint reveals the deep distrust and fear of the worker that seems to be growing in the mind of the management.

The answer to the divide between the worker and the management in Assam's tea gardens does not lie in seeking protection from the government or in strengthening one's security force or in paying protection-money to the ultras. Neither does it lie in reducing whatever little benefits the workers are having at present or retrenching them or going in for more and more of temporary labour. The answer lies in being just to the workers and in giving them what is their due as per the rules and regulations that are in force. It also needs to be kept in mind that whatever claims the tea fraternity might make of having invested in the social good of the state, the fact remains that the average Assamese villager living adjacent to the tea gardens does not really think that tea is his heritage, something of which he should be proud of. The tea industry is seen as the 'other' by the average citizen, as an exploitative industry which has little link with the lives of the common people. Surely, a sense of involvement cannot be brought about by an occasional dole for a sports complex or a literary prize. What is needed is the participation of the industry in the effort to bring about an overall improvement in the quality of life of the common people. This does not necessarily call for huge amounts of money but for some degree of sensitivity to the plight both of the tea worker as well as of the villagers living next door. Some might also wishfully suggest that perhaps the long-term solution lies in eventual worker participation in management. But those are utopian ideas especially in the context of the prevailing mindset—a mindset so aptly reflected in a recent proposal put forward by some tea planters to preserve the 'heritage' of tea by refurbishing the old managerial '*chang* bungalows' so as to give the tourist a feel of what life in the tea gardens was like in the good old British days. But it must also be kept in mind that for the tea garden worker this heritage of tea actually represents one of the worst forms of human exploitation and suffering.

VI Fresh Tension in Upper-Assam Tea Belt*

During the initial phase of the current movement against 'foreign nationals', clashes had taken place in several tea gardens in Upper Assam between student volunteers and tea labour, the latter resenting the loss of wages owing to the picketings and bandhs. Subsequently, the teagardens were excluded from bandh and picketing programmes and the tension that was building up began to subside. Much of the initial antagonism of the tea labourers towards the movement also died down. On the contrary, tea-garden labour began to be gradually drawn into the movement, primarily due to the efforts of a small but influential section of educated tea-garden youth who have been asserting that the tea-garden tribes are very much part of the Assamese mainstream and that they, while maintaining their distinct identity, must identify themselves with the Assamese national cause. Both the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA) and the Chah Mazdoor Sahitya Sanskriti Parishad have expressed their support to the All Assam Students Union (AASU) demands. The ATTSA is represented in the AASU executive and AASU has promised full support to the association in any economic or other demands that the latter may take up in the near future. The educated tea-garden youth are bitter over the large degree of manipulation being carried on by the ownership and management in the matter of appointment to tea-garden jobs of the managerial as well as clerical cadre. In fighting this, they expect to find a strong ally in the AASU.

This appears to be a significant development particularly in view of the fact that both the ATTSA and the Sahitya Sanskriti Parishad are not under the influence of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), till now the most influential trade union in Assam's tea gardens and controlled today largely by the Congress (I). Despite this apparent coming closer of the ATTSA and the AASU, certain developments in the Upper-Assam tea belt suggest that all is not well between the sponsors of the movement and the tea-garden labour. There have been reports of

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fresh clashes between the tea labour and the student and youth activists of the AASU and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and the relationship between tea-garden labour and surrounding Assamese villages has deteriorated in several areas. According to the sponsors of the movement, this change in attitude on the part of tea-garden labour is due to the 'machinations' of political parties opposed to the movement, particularly the Congress (I) and the CPI (M). Even if one were to admit that over the months there has been a concerted attempt by some political parties to draw away the tea-garden community from the anti-foreigner movement, it is difficult to accept the explanation that the tea labour are being alienated merely because of such propaganda. While it is natural that political parties opposed to the agitation should try to win over the support of the tea-garden labour who number nearly 45 lakhs, such attempts are likely to be attended by violence.

Tea labour in the Upper-Assam belt appear to be divided, with a section close to the Congress (I) having come out in open opposition to the current movement. Similar is the case in several gardens in the Namrup area which happen to be under CITU control. Although the section openly opposing the movement is still not sizable, yet passions are running high in several gardens often resulting in assaults on AASU and AAGSP activists. One such incident of violence took place in the Ganeshbarie Tea Estate on 15 June 1980. The trouble in the Ganeshbarie Tea Estate, a Marwari-owned concern some 20 kilometres from Dibrugarh, was sparked off by a dispute between the tea labour and some Assamese youth from the nearby villages over seating arrangements in a circus show being held in the tea-garden. The tea labour protested over the alleged misbehaviour with a tea-garden girl by some Assamese youngmen and there was a minor clash. The following day (16 June), two Assamese youths were attacked by a group of tea labourers within the garden premises, and one of them later died. This led to a sharp mounting of tension throughout the area and the tea-gardens were rife with rumours of impending attacks by Assamese villagers. But because of the efforts of AASU and AAGSP volunteers, there has been no retaliatory violence.

The trouble at Ganeshbarie was not a sudden outburst. Even Chah Mazdoor Sangh (an INTUC body) has said that the trouble had been 'engineered' in a bid to create a rift between the tea labour and the local villagers. While the complicity of the management and certain

political forces in fomenting the trouble at Ganeshbarie cannot be ruled out, there was another important factor adding to the tension not only in that particular garden but in several others as well. The tea-garden managements in Assam have traditionally avoided employing local Assamese hands and the Assamese villagers living adjacent to the vast stretches of tea have been accepting this as a common and natural practice. While an occasional local village youth might secure some clerical position in a nearby tea-garden, the majority of the villagers have not looked upon the tea-gardens as possible venues of employment. The lack of Assamese labour in the tea-gardens is commonly attributed by the management to the aversion of the local people for physical labour. Yet, there was a time during the early stages of tea plantation when Assamese labourers, mainly Kacharis and other plains-tribals, worked in large numbers in Assam's tea estates. When the bulk of the Chinese tealabourers left around the year 1848, the vacuum had then been filled by local Assamese labour. It was only when the acreage under tea rapidly increased and the tea estates started to expand at the cost of land held by the local peasantry that it became imperative to bring in large numbers of labourers from outside the state. Yet, it was an Assamese tribal, Madhu Koch, who in 1858 had led a revolt of labourers against the horrible exploitation by the British planters. Madhu Koch was sentenced to eight years imprisonment and peace was restored. But the British had learnt a lesson. From then onwards, the British planters followed a policy of deliberately discouraging the recruitment of local labour.

Surprisingly this year, 1980, several gardens including Ganeshbarie recruited local village youth as casual hands within the factory during the plucking season. This has been resented by a section of tea labour which feels that it is being deprived of working in the factory and made to do outdoor work so that the newly-recruited casual hands may be accommodated. Although the recruitment of such casual hands as yet poses no threat to the employment of tea labour, this encroachment is being seen by the tea labour as a future threat. Perhaps, this sudden interest on the part of the management to employ local villagers is part of a greater plan intended to create dissension between tea labour and the local villagers; perhaps the move is a reaction to the current agitation. When asked about the appointment of such casual hands from the nearby villages, the manager of the Ganeshbarie Tea Estate said

that this has all along been a 'common' practice during the plucking season although this year for the first time several Assamese girls too have been taken in on a contract basis for work within the factory. Whatever be the motives leading to such employment of casual hands from nearby villages by the management in several teagardens of the Upper Assam belt, there is no doubt that this has resulted in a lot of misgivings amongst tea labour. More than anything else, the 'foreigner' issue is not as real to the tea-garden labourer in Upper Assam as it is for the Assamese peasant in Lower Assam.

C
The Adivasi Struggle*

What happened on the fateful day of 24 November 2007[1] on the streets of Guwahati not only brought into sharp focus the changing power equations of the state but also revealed certain fault lines in a society that has prided itself on its liberal foundations and tolerant lifestyle. The merciless manner in which the Adivasis were beaten up in full glare of an unresponsive public in retaliation for acts of vandalism committed by a section of the demonstrators, brought unto surface certain inbuilt prejudices and assumptions of mainstream Assamese society towards the marginalized and peripheral sections. While it is true that the violence which climaxed with the stripping of the Adivasi girl needs to be seen against the overall climate of brutalization that has set in throughout the country, yet the happenings cannot be seen minus certain grave connotations which went with them. Although it would be wrong to view the three criminals who assaulted and stripped the girl as being representative of the Assamese ethos and society, yet the act is being seen by many as an ultimate expression of the inbuilt prejudice and class hatred which marks the approach of a sizable section of the Assamese middle class towards the tea-garden tribes. However, one redeeming aspect of the shameful episode was the sharp reaction of

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an otherwise moribund civil society. For once, civil society in the state acted with alacrity and condemned the incident with one voice, while at the same time asserting that the 24 November incidents should not be viewed as an Assamese–Adivasi clash. No amount of outrage seems to be sufficient right now to heal the divide that has set in between the Adivasis and the Assamese because of this one incident. On that day, Guwahati saw a total collapse of the administration and the Chief Minister, who is also in charge of the Home portfolio, has admitted that his administration failed in its duty. But there seems to have been more to it than mere administrative failure. Also at play seemed to be a certain mindset which views the tea-garden workers as inferior human beings. The state government in a delayed damage control exercise has ordered a CBI enquiry into the incidents and has transferred some senior police officials. The CBI probe may eventually be able to go into some of the reasons behind the violence and fix responsibility for the administrative failure.

While inbuilt prejudices and perceptions about the tea-labour community are still very much extant among the influential sections of the Assamese society, yet the fact cannot be denied that in all these years, ever since the first batches of indentured labour were brought into Assam in the 1860s from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh, there hasn't been any major clash involving the tea-labour community and the immediate Assamese neighbours. But the absence of tension between the two was also quite often due to the fact that interaction between the two communities was quite marginal, with the management actively preventing tea workers from mixing with the local population. This is true with many gardens even today. Thus, for the average Assamese the community of tea-garden workers has remained very much the 'other', and it is only in recent years that there has been a noticeable change in perception about the Adivasis and their significant contribution not only towards Assam's economy but also to Assamese literature and culture. All the prejudice and social divide notwithstanding, there seems to be a conscious effort by organizations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha to make the Adivasis feel that they are major components of the still emerging Assamese nationality. That a substantial section of the Adivasi community too considers itself a part of the Assamese nationality is reflected in writings of Adivasi intellectuals who have had their education in Assamese. It is

significant that barely a week after the Guwahati incident, Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA) leaders asserted their Assamese credentials at a joint meet with the All Assam Students Union (AASU). At the same meeting the AASU declared that that one single incident would not be able to 'disrupt the nation-building process' in the region, implying thereby that the Adivasis are an integral part of the Assamese community. However, not all would agree with the view of the Assamese-Adivasi writer Ganesh Chandra Kurmi that the 'tea tribes are today fully assimilated into the Assamese national mainstream'. Nevertheless, despite all the hindrances in the form of social prejudices and limited interaction, it must be said that the process of coming together of the two communities is an ongoing one. In this context it needs to be recalled that during British rule, the tea-garden tribes were forced to lead an isolated existence and even the winds of the national struggle were not allowed to reach the tea gardens of Assam. Though there are several instances of tea workers going on strike during the concluding years of colonial rule, yet it was only after independence that the first stirrings of change took place with the beginnings of trade-union activity and the subsequent introduction of some degree of social legislation under the initiative of then Congress leaders like Omeo Kumar Das. While these new provisions did bring some succour to the lives of the tea workers, yet successive state governments have failed to bring about any tangible improvement in the quality of life of these people. The present pitiable condition of the tea worker can be gauged from the fact that many of the provisions of legislation like the Assam Tea Plantation Act of 1951 and the Assam Plantation Rules of 1956 are yet to be implemented in most of the tea gardens of the state.

Following the Guwahati incidents, almost all the major political parties have been vying with each other to prove their support for the Adivasi demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. It is obvious that with the panchayat elections round the corner, none of these parties would like to alienate the tea workers who have always been a major deciding force in battles of the ballot. In about 124 of the 800 *Zilla Parishad* and in 700 out of the 2,200 *Gaon* Panchayat seats, the Adivasis hold a clear sway over others. For decades, the Congress, with the help of its INTUC-led Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh, had reaped huge electoral benefits out of its Adivasi votebank in the hundreds of tea gardens of Assam. But in recent years there has been much erosion in the Congress's vote

bank with other parties making inroads and Adivasi student and youth organizations like the All Assam Adivasi Students Association (AAASA) and the ATTSA taking over the leadership. But given the complex demographic pattern of the state and the refusal on the part of the existing ST communities to extend the privilege to the Adivasis and the five other communities, it is uncertain whether the support for ST status offered by the different political parties would eventually lead to legislation to grant the Adivasis their ST status. There are 23 STs in the state, of which 14 are hill tribes and 9 are plains tribes. It is an anomaly that those who have been accorded ST status in the hills lose it if they settle in the plains and vice versa.

This territory specific classification seems to defy all logic and is clearly a hangover of colonial ethnography. For instance, a Karbi ceases to be ST outside Kabi Anglong and a Bodo cannot claim the same status in Karbi Anglong! The Adivasis are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the Central List which refers to them as 'Tea Garden Labourers and Tea Garden Tribes and Ex Tea Garden Labour and Ex Tea Garden Tribes' and they are divided into 96 ethnic groups. The total ST population of the state in the last census was 3.3 million and if one were to add some 2.5 to 3 million tea garden and ex tea-garden labour, then the latter would come to constitute around 50 per cent of the total ST population, thereby making it the largest single group. This would bring about a major change in the existing power equations of the state and is bound to be resisted by those communities which are now listed as STs. At present out of the 126 Assembly seats, 22 are reserved for STs and Scheduled Castes (SC) in about a dozen seats Adivasi candidates win, while in about 36 constituencies minority voters are the deciding factor. But if the Adivasis secure scheduled status, then there is the possibility that an additional 26 constituencies will become reserved.

The state government has tried to work out of the impasse by suggesting an extension of the ST list by reducing the percentage of quota for the OBCs. But this has not impressed those communities which are enjoying ST status because such a move would open up constituencies presently reserved for the STs to the Adivasis, apart from encroaching upon the employment and education sector. The most vocal in its opposition has been the Bodo Peoples Progressive Front (BPPF) which is the ruling party in the Bodoland Territory Autonomous Area (BTAD) and shares power with the Congress in the state. The Bodo leadership has

been maintaining that the Adivasis are migrants and cannot claim to be indigenous to the region. The BPPF has warned that if the Adivasis are given ST status then it would revive the demand for a separate Bodoland outside Assam. Thirty of the 40 seats in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) are reserved for STs and the BPPF has made it clear that it 'would not allow any new community to enjoy the political rights enjoyed by the existing tribal people in the council'. The All Assam Tribal Sangha which is an umbrella body representing the ST communities of the state, has also opposed the move saying that neither the Adivasis nor the five other communities claiming scheduled status—the Tai-Ahom, Moran, Muttuck, Chutiya, and Koch–Rajbanshi—fulfil the requisites laid down for qualifying as a ST. This has pushed the state government into a virtually impossible situation. If it does not support the Adivasi demand, then it stands to lose its traditional vote bank and this could have a disastrous effect on panchayat and assembly polls. On the other hand, if it does try to push through the Adivasis demand for scheduled status, then it stands to lose the support of its coalition partner, the BPPF. As a final way out of the impasse, the state government is now offering to give the six communities demanding ST status, all the facilities which the STs enjoy minus political empowerment. How far this will be acceptable to the Adivasis and the five other communities remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, realizing that the speedy attainment of their demand is fraught with difficulties, the Adivasi leadership is trying to win over the support of the regional forces. The AASU has already expressed its support for the Adivasi demand and at a joint meeting of the student bodies, the AAASA and the AATSA emphasized the need to live in peace and amity with the other communities. The main thrust of the joint AASU–AAASA–AATSA meeting was against the present state government and the Congress leadership which is being accused of betraying the interests of the tea garden and ex-tea garden workers. The AAASA–AATSA-led combine is trying to build up a joint front with the AASU because it knows that the demand for ST status could eventually lead to a state of confrontation with the Bodos and other tribal communities. Barely a decade ago there were severe clashes between the Adivasis and the Bodos which left scores killed and hundreds injured, while over a lakh people were uprooted from their homes. It however remains to be seen if the attempt by AAASA and AATSA will bring in quick results, for

some of the units of these student/youth bodies have already expressed their unwillingness to enter into a joint programme with the AASU. Moreover, militant outfits like the Adivasi Cobra Force and the Birsa Commando Force which played a major role during the Bodo–Adivasi clashes, have now begun to increase their influence among the Adivasis. This could further complicate the situation.

Given these complexities, there is every possibility of the built-in Adivasi anger and frustration being channelized into militant lines. In this context it needs to be noted that apart from history of strikes for improved wages or against oppressive policies of the management from the 1920s onwards, the tea-garden workers have seldom been organized to participate in mass democratic struggles. For instance, the vast majority of tea-garden workers were kept out of the freedom struggle and except for instances like the Chargola exodus in Cachar, the tea estates of the state were virtually untouched by the Civil Disobedience or the Quit India movements. Even during the post-independence period, the tea workers have led a more or less insulated existence and did not have the opportunity to participate in popular democratic protest movements. Hence, it is only natural that during mass protests by Adivasis, there would always be the danger of some sections indulging in violence. This is exactly what happened during the Guwahati rally. Not that there haven't been trade-union activity in the tea gardens. Apart from the INTUC-led Asom Chah Mazdoor Sangh which is easily the largest such body, other political parties also have their unions in most of the gardens. But the activities of these unions have mostly been confined to immediate economic demands and there has been little attempt over the years to give an ideological orientation to Adivasi politics. It is only in recent years that under the influence of the educated sections of Adivasi youth a new dimension is being added to Adivasi politics which, not being satisfied merely with short term economic demands and the narrow groove of vote banks, is trying to relate itself to the broader issues concerning all segments of the Adivasi community. The struggle for ST status must, therefore, be seen as part of a wider struggle of identity assertion by the Adivasis—a search for their cultural taproots and heritage. Of the 96 different groups which make up the Adivasi population of the state, quite a few have organized themselves on their own tribe platforms. Therefore, it would be interesting to see as to how far the present struggle led by the student/youth organizations would

be able to bring together the different groups with a common agenda of struggle. And, this struggle for political empowerment would get its impetus only if it is accompanied by an agenda which would address the immediate socio-economic issues facing the Adivasis of Assam. The deplorable state of health and sanitation in the overwhelming majority of the tea gardens of the state, the wide-scale illiteracy and unemployment, the abnormally high rate of malnutrition and female mortality, the high incidence of diseases like tuberculosis, and the almost total lack of social security measures are some of the aspects which would have to be addressed by the youth leadership. Every year, waterborne diseases claim hundreds of Adivasi lives and this year alone more than 200 died in the Upper-Assam tea gardens, prompting the state Health Minister to say that FIRs would be lodged for culpable homicide against the errant management of these gardens. It needs no underlining the fact that the tea-garden workers are among the most neglected sections of the society, their regular wages and other attendant 'privileges' notwithstanding. Worse is the fate of the ex-tea garden workers who have settled mostly in and around the tea gardens. The present upsurge seems to be the beginning of a wider struggle for securing the rights and dignity of a people who have suffered some of the worst forms of degradation and who still continue to work in an atmosphere reminiscent of the colonial days. It is a measure of their growing maturity that within a week of the Guwahati incident the Adivasi youth leadership succeeded in stopping acts of violence carried out against Assamese villagers in certain upper Assam-Adivasi dominated areas and made it clear that the destiny of the Adivasi community cannot be seen as separate from that of Assam and her people.

Note

1. On 24 November 2007, in the course of a demonstration by tea-garden workers in the capital complex of Dispur, a section of the crowd turned violent and attacked vehicles and pelted stones at shop buildings. This resulted in a severe backlash from the local residents who mercilessly beat up several of the demonstrators and stripped naked an Adivasi girl. The incident evoked strong condemnation from all sections of civil society in Assam and the northeast.

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Chapter 4

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

I Introduction

The concluding section of this collection raises some posers regarding civil-society intervention in conflict situations in northeastern India and the response of the state. The essay comparing the Naga and Assam peace processes tries to show how different the two situations are despite the fact that they are rooted in the northeast. The history of civil-society intervention in the peace process in Nagaland has been a long one. Beginning with the Naga Peace Mission which may be termed as the first major non-partisan civil-society initiative to bring about peace in a conflict-ridden situation, Naga civil society and its traditional institutions have charted out for themselves a meaningful role in the Naga peace process. In the past few years Nagaland has been passing through a very worrisome phase of factional killings between the insurgent groups which have, on occasion, even led to turf wars. Civil society efforts to stop the violence first led to the formation of the *Forum for National Reconciliation* in March 2008 to be followed by the *Covenant for Reconciliation* in June 2009. Ever since then, Naga civil society organizations have been playing a positive role in containing the violence as also in keeping alive the peace process with the Government of India. By contrast, civil-society space in Assam has been progressively denuded by populist agitations and armed conflict spread over three decades. It was during the Assam Movement on the foreigners' issue that the process of marginalization of the civil-society voice began, with organizations such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS) displaying a large degree of intolerance towards any form of dissent. The two essays on the ASS try to show how the role of lead-

ing civil-society groups in Assam in defending democratic space became more and more limited as they increasingly grew partisan. And, when the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) with its militaristic set-up took over, authoritarianism took on new shades. Therefore, when the ULFA nominated the People's Consultative Group (PCG) to broker peace with the Government of India, the partisan nature of the group made it difficult for it to win over support from representative sections of Assam civil society. While it is true that the PCG began with a large measure of goodwill from the people of Assam who desired an amicable and honourable solution to the problem of insurgency in the state, yet it failed to make good of the opportunity of creating a viable platform of civil society voices in Assam. Even when it floated the umbrella organization of several civil society groups known as the People's Committee for Peace Initiative (PCPI), its partisan motives soon became clear and several constituent units dropped out. Another point which comes up for discussion is whether civil society, even with the best of intentions can really take upon itself to prepare an agenda for talks for an armed insurgent group that has been fighting the Indian nation-state for over three decades? The situation has been further complicated by the split in the United Liberation Front of Asom, with the faction led by Paresh Baruah refusing to compromise on the question of a sovereign Assam.

This section also tries to focus on the role of traditional institutions and structures of power in a representative democratic set-up. It needs to be remembered that while the Constitution of India provides for the safeguarding of the customary rights and practices of the tribal peoples covered by the Fifth and Sixth Schedules,[1] it does not provide any such space to the traditional chiefs and rajas. Therefore, a clear distinction needs to be made between the constitutional privileges given to the tribal people and the 'rights' of the rajas and chieftains. But, today there seems to be a tendency to confuse the two and to see the 'people's assemblies' presided over by the 'rajas' and chiefs as democratic institutions meant to defend the traditional rights of the masses. Several Khasi *Syiems* and Garo *Nokmas* have been demanding that their hereditary rights be enshrined in the constitution.[2] It is in this context that the defining line between constitutional guarantees for 'customary rights' of the tribal people and the hereditary traditional rights and privileges of the rajas and chiefs must be made quite clear. One must also be aware of the apparent paradox between the 'consensual

democracy' of the tribal assemblies and that of representative electoral democracy. However, Indian democracy has been attempting to resolve this paradox by experimenting with the idea of a synthesis between customary rights and privileges as upheld by traditional structures of power, and representative democracy based on individual adult suffrage and the rule of law. And, in this a certain degree of success has certainly been achieved. The experiment at communitization in Nagaland where village councils have been playing a very meaningful role in running the affairs of the community is a case in point.

There is no doubt that strong points about communitarian life and collective functioning are ingrained in traditional tribal institutions and these values are an asset in any democracy. But it must also be kept in mind that underneath consensual functioning there is often the tyranny of custom dictated upon by the chiefs and the rajas and this provides little space for individual dissent. Moreover, claims to egalitarianism run counter to the exclusion of women from the decision-making process of the 'people's assemblies'. The opinion of the elders quite often passes off as the collective and undisputed opinion of the community. And it would be erroneous to suggest that all tribal assemblies are essentially democratic in character and uphold egalitarian values. One also needs to deliberate whether the failure of representative democracy to ensure distributive justice and the rule of law to its citizens has created a situation where traditional structures of power are seen as alternative models to democracy. Therefore, it remains to be seen as to how the Indian nation-state succeeds in reconciling the contrasting pulls of representative democracy and traditional structures of power and consensual democracy, of the rights of the individual and the concerns of the community. The question of exclusive political and territorial rights of particular communities/nationalities as opposed to the idea of inclusive social space, where each citizen irrespective of his/her loyalties would actively participate in the process of building a democratic nation-state, is bound to assume challenging proportions in the years to come.

Finally, no discussion on the northeast would be complete without referring to the thousands of men, women, and children that have fallen prey to ethnic violence, State repression, and militant attacks. Inter-ethnic killings throughout the northeastern region have shown how dangerous the mix of ethnicity and territoriality can be, while at the same time highlighting the limitations of exclusivist ethno-nationalist

struggles. As far as the State is concerned, the roll call of the dead continues. The security forces continue to violate human rights in a variety of ways—fake encounters being the most blatant one. In our 'Introduction' to Section C we have already referred to the steady rise in killings by the State in Assam because of the use of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, even though killings by armed insurgent groups have gone down perceptibly. The two commentaries on State killings in Assam during the height of the ULFA-led insurgency give an idea about the impunity and indifference with which the security forces continue to violate human rights in areas under draconian laws like the Armed Forces Act; of how each fake encounter widens the gap between the masses and the nation-state, while at the same time making it conducive for the militant groups to recruit new members, thus helping the endless cycle of violence to continue.

Notes

1. There is plenty of debate as to whether the Sixth Schedule should continue to be applied to ethnic nationalities that have secured separate states for themselves with distinct legislative provisions aimed at securing their land and customary rights. The Sixth Schedule which provides for traditional structures of power has come in the way of implementing Panchayati Raj institutions which provide for reservation for women and are democratic in content.

2. In June 2012 Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo traditional rajahs and chiefs met the Congress President and other leaders to press their demand for a constitutional status for their rights and privileges.

II Naga Peace Talks
High Hopes and Hard Realities*

It has taken over 50 years of wide-scale human suffering for old prejudices to end and the stage to be set for meaningful negotiations

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between the Government of India and the Naga underground. On the one hand the government's perceptions about the Naga struggle have undergone a sea-change and it has shown a large degree of flexibility in trying to work out a political settlement; on the other hand those who have been fighting for an independent Nagalim have also become aware of the inherent complexities involved in their struggle and the impossibility of a military solution. The two principal issues that need to be resolved through negotiations are: (a) the question of Naga sovereignty/self-determination, and (b) the question of a unified Nagalim/Greater Nagalim. The NSCN (I–M) has given no indication of any rethinking on the question of a Greater Nagalim. On the other issue, however, though the official position of the NSCN (I–M) still is that it is committed to a sovereign, independent Nagalim, it is clear that greater autonomy and not sovereignty would be the issue that would have to be hammered out in the coming talks.

It would not be an exaggeration, surely, to suggest that the future course of insurgency in the entire northeastern part of the country now seems to depend on the final outcome of the talks to be held between the NSCN (I–M) and the Government of India. The Muivah–Swu visit to Delhi has broken a deadlock between the Government of India and the Naga underground which lasted some 36 years, the last discussion having been held with Indira Gandhi in 1967. The Naga struggle has not only been the most protracted militant movement in post-independence India, it has also succeeded in raising some very fundamental questions about the nature and function of the Indian nation-state and our federal polity.

In the course of over 50 years of insurgent politics, both parties to the conflict have been made wiser by the actualities of the ground situation. While the Indian state seems to have realised that it would be suicidal to try to steamroll the wishes and aspirations of even the smallest of nationalities which make up this multinational country, those involved in the struggle to achieve an independent Nagalim seem to have accepted the need for a negotiated settlement of the issue. Much of the human tragedy that has occurred in the northeastern region may be said to have stemmed from the Centre's initial inability to comprehend the complex relationships and equations which mark the different nationalities which fill up the northeastern mosaic. Without going into the oft-repeated facts about the Naga struggle, it may be said that a little

effort on the part of the Government of India to understand the Naga mindset during the initial years of the problem could perhaps have led to a completely different situation. The NNC's demand for the protection of the Naga way of life within an autonomous framework (the NNC was never clear on what it actually meant by self-determination) was viewed by the centre almost solely from one single angle—that of secession from India. It failed to see that the Naga issue raised some very central questions about the future of small nationalities in the Indian nation-state. This was a case of the Centre's inability to see the other viewpoint because of certain inbuilt prejudices and assumptions about small nationalities which seemed to be somewhat outside the 'mainstream' of Indian politics and culture. And, as far as the insurgents were concerned, their initial response to state repression was marked by a general suspicion and hatred of everything that was related to the India and the Indian subcontinent.

It is in this context that one must note the very significant role played by the Naga civil-society organizations in creating the right climate for the peaceful resolution of a long-standing conflict. Thus it may be said that it is a sign of the maturing of our democratic polity that civil society initiatives in resolving state–people conflicts have assumed new dimensions. The recent discussions which the NSCN(I–M) leadership has had with a cross-section of Indian political opinion involving both ruling and opposition parties must, therefore, be seen as yet another stage in the complex nation-building process in post-independence India.

Before we take up the prospects and possibilities of the current peace talks and the civil-society initiative, it would perhaps be relevant to make a very brief survey of earlier peace initiatives and as well as the moves of the Government of India to resolve the conflict within the ambit of the Union of India. It may be recalled that the first ceasefire between the Centre and the federal government of Nagaland took place on 6 September 1964—exactly nine months after the formation of the state of Nagaland in December 1963. The suspension of operations and the ceasefire was the result of the efforts of the Peace Mission consisting of Jayaprakash Narayan, Rev Michael Scott, and B.P. Chaliha. The Peace Mission's proposals marked a major departure from the accepted position of the Centre and the all-India Congress leadership regarding the Naga struggle and heralded the beginning of a new perspective and approach to the Naga issue. For the first time it was acknowledged that

the Naga struggle was not just a law and order problem fomented by foreign interests, but as an expression of the Naga national sentiment. The Peace Mission had clearly stated that it 'appreciates and understands the desire of the Nagas for self-determination and their urge to preserve their integrity'. But, it may also be recalled that all the while, the Peace Mission emphasised the need for a peaceful settlement of the Naga issue saying that 'the Naga Federal Government (NFG) could on its own volition decide to be a participant in the Union of India and mutually settle terms and conditions for that purpose'. It also urged upon the Indian government to recast and reshape its relationship with the Nagas 'so as to satisfy the political aspirations of all sections of Naga opinion'. It may be said here that the Peace Mission was the first major civil-society attempt to bring about normality in Nagaland. However, it did not elaborate on the term 'self-determination' and did not say whether it applied to political autonomy or independence. The confusion regarding this term and the opposite interpretations given to it by the Government of India and the Naga underground would consistently act as a major roadblock to the success of future negotiations. Nevertheless, Clause 10 of the Peace Mission's proposals while accepting the right to self-determination of all 'subject peoples', called upon the NFG to accept the 'historical processes that have taken place to give birth to the Union of India and to the great concepts and ideals underlying the Indian Constitution'.

The Peace Mission Proposals were preceded by the 16-Point Agreement between the Government of India and the Naga People's Convention paving the way for the formation of the Naga Hills–Tuensang area as a separate state within the Indian Union. This agreement provided for a large degree of autonomy for the Nagas, with Clause 7 stating that no act or law passed by the Union parliament that affected the religious and social practices of the Nagas, their customary laws and procedure and criminal justice system contingent on their customary law was to have any force in the new state 'unless specifically applied to it by a majority vote of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly'. Clause 8 of the agreement stated that every tribe would retain the power of rule-making and administration of its own affairs through local bodies like the Village Council, the Range Council, and the Tribal Council. These bodies would also retain their power to deal with disputes involving breaches of customary laws and usages. Thus

the 16-Point Agreement and the subsequent formation of the state of Nagaland were a major step towards satisfying the aspirations of the Naga people, all the limitations in the agreement notwithstanding.

In the light of all this it may be said that the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution of India (1962) by which the state of Nagaland was formed not only proved to a great extent the flexibility and accommodative power of the Indian constitution, but also indicated that the Indian state, its repressive face notwithstanding, was also slowly learning to adjust itself to the autonomy demands of the small nationalities. (This cannot be said of most of the other Afro-Asian countries which too had freed themselves from the colonial yoke in the 1940s and 1950s.) This amendment inserted Clause 371 A which enjoined certain special provisions with respect to the state of Nagaland, and stated that notwithstanding anything in the constitution no act of parliament shall apply to the state of Nagaland unless the Nagaland Legislative Assembly by a resolution so decides in respect of: (a) religious and social practices of the Nagas, (b) Naga customary law and procedure, (c) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to the Naga customary law, and (d) ownership and transfer of land and its resources.

It is significant that the clause relating to 'land and its resources' is the only one of its kind as far as the states of the Indian Union are concerned and the special provisions went a long way in protecting the Naga 'way of life'. Both the 16-Point Agreement and the Peace Mission Proposals were rejected by the Naga underground because they did not state anything specifically about sovereignty or territoriality. Today, however, there seems to be a growing realization among a section of the Naga intelligentsia that the 16-Point Agreement was a major step forward in safeguarding the wishes of the Naga people, although questions relating to sovereignty and territoriality were not covered. For instance, several Naga leaders have started referring to the Agreement, saying that it could be a good starting point for negotiations on Naga autonomy.

Following the creation of the state of Nagaland, traditional power structures were attempted to be supplemented by the 'representative' forms. With the introduction of elected government, new centres of power emerged. But it is interesting to note that although Nagaland has

had several successful elections and is run by an elected government, yet after all these years of 'representative' rule the credibility of the traditional power structures has in no way been eroded. Rather, in recent years one notices the consolidation of these traditional structures in the form of different civil society organizations. Alternative power structures have not been able to appropriate the voice of the Naga society and the role of the elected representatives appears quite marginalized. On the contrary, civil-society organizations based on traditional power structures have come to play a significant role today in mobilizing public opinion in favour of a peaceful settlement of the Naga issue. There seems to have been a synthesis of traditional linkages and modern institutional ideas, as is to be seen in the composition and role of organizations such as the Naga Mothers Association or the Naga Hoho. It may be recalled here that when Phizo started his campaign to mobilize the Naga masses on the issue of referendum or election boycott, he relied on the traditional power structure and made it a point to win over the confidence of the chiefs and the *gaonburas*.

While discussing the use of 'community resources' in building up political organizations, Paul Brass refers to the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons which in the 1940s and 1950s based their organizations on tribal councils. Phizo's strategy paid immediate dividends as was demonstrated by the support he received from the village chiefs and tribal councils for the cause of Naga independence. The politics of the NNC led by the incipient Naga middle class posed no threat to the traditional leadership of the tribal councils. Just as in the 1950s and 1960s these traditional power structures extended their support to Phizo and the NNC (and selectively to the NSCN after 1980), today these very structures are bringing pressure on both the factions of the NSCN to work out a settlement with the Government of India. This is, by any reckoning, a significant development. Civil-society organizations drawing their strength from the traditional structures of power seem to have achieved something which the state has failed to in all these years.

It is against the background of the civil society initiative for a durable peace in Nagaland that the current peace talks between the NSCN (I–M) and the Government of India need to be viewed. Although the details of the discussions with the NSCN (I–M) held abroad and recently

in New Delhi have been kept a well-guarded secret, yet it is obvious that the questions of sovereignty and territoriality must have been raised. From the statements issued by the NSCN (I–M) it seems quite clear that it has not moved away from its stand either on sovereignty or territoriality. Nowhere till now has the NSCN (I–M) suggested that it is in favour of working out a solution within the ambit of the Indian constitution or the Indian Union. Some circles have tried to read too much meaning into the fact that the NSCN leaders have travelled on Indian passports. The Ex-Union Home Secretary K. Padmanabhaiah has suggested that this could be seen as a sort of climb-down on the part of the NSCN (I–M) leadership on the question of an independent Nagalim. But this has already been refuted by the NSCN leadership. There is also no sign whatsoever to show that the NSCN(I–M) has moved away from its objective of a greater Nagalim. On the contrary, the NSCN leadership has made it clear that they would never compromise on their demand for the unification of all the Naga tribes.

Not only the NSCN (I–M) but almost all other Naga organizations, both underground and overground, believe that the right of all the Nagas to live in a composite homeland is inalienable. Therefore, while the NSCN (I–M) is keeping attention engaged on 'substantive issues' like dual citizenship, a separate flag, control over defence, trade and currency, it seems to be waiting for the opportune moment to raise the two major issues of sovereignty and territoriality. With the chance of the Indian government agreeing to an independent Nagalim being remote, there seems to be every possibility that the NSCN leadership might insist that autonomy short of independence could be acceptable to the Nagas only if the demand for the unification of all Naga tribes in a common homeland is accepted by the Centre.

If the Centre agrees to such a demand, then, judging by the mood in Manipur and also in Arunachal and Assam, the possibility of large-scale violence enveloping major parts of the northeastern region cannot be ruled out. It should not be assumed that the Centre would be much worried over such a development. Rather, in certain ways this could be of advantage to the Centre. It would be able to prevent unity between the states of the northeastern region on major issues as also drive a wedge between the different insurgent organizations of the region. It may be recalled here that by once agreeing to extend the ceasefire with-

out territorial limits, the Centre had succeeded in sowing the seeds of suspicion and distrust among the insurgent groups of the affected states and in finally isolating the NSCN (I–M) from the other insurgent outfits of the northeastern region. Once the NSCN (I–M)'s position on territoriality became known, it quickly lost its position of leadership among the northeastern insurgent groups. On the home front, however, the NSCN (I–M) received wide support cutting across all segments of Naga society and seemed to consolidate its position. But that too appears to have undergone a change now, if one were to take into account the recent fratricidal clashes between the two factions of the NSCN as also the NSCN(I–M)'s criticism of the role and intentions of the Naga Hoho and the Council of Baptist churches.

In the past six months or so, the ground situation in Nagaland has changed and bitter clashes have erupted between the NSCN(I–M) and the NSCN (Khaplang) [NSCN (K)]. This has put a question mark on efforts to achieve unity and understanding among the different Naga tribes. A large section of Naga public opinion therefore feel that real peace in Nagaland is not possible without the unity of the underground groups on certain basic issues. For its part, the NSCN (K) has made it clear that any agreement reached only between the Indian government and the NSCN (I–M) would not be acceptable to a large section of the Nagas. The Chief Minister S. C. Jamir too has called for the involvement of all sections of the underground in the negotiations. Therefore, it would be a bit premature to conclude that a Government of India–NSCN(I–M) agreement would put a final end to insurgent politics in Nagaland. Such an agreement would have to be followed up with meaningful negotiations with the other groups as well.

Given the changing ground reality, it is doubtful whether the NSCN(I–M) would continue to exert the same degree of influence that it has been wielding till the recent past. This would naturally be to the advantage of the Government of India as well as the state government of Nagaland headed by Jamir who is known for his sympathy for the Khaplang faction. It is obvious that the more long-drawn the negotiations turn out to be, the greater the disadvantage for the NSCN(I–M) because of the possibility of increasing factional trouble. It must be remembered that when Phizo led the NNC as the only recognised political force of the Naga people, the situation was quite different. Yet

despite its unchallenged position, the NNC had carried out a 'plebiscite' and a poll boycott to establish its credentials. But this cannot be said of the NSCN (I–M). Its voice has carried weight amongst the Nagas because it has the largest arsenal and the best fighting machinery among the insurgent outfits of the region and precisely because it has not gone back on its two major demands relating to sovereignty and territoriality. Even then the fact remains that the NSCN (I–M) has never tested its credentials among the people nor has it devised any mechanism to test their will. It is to be noted that in today's scenario in Nagaland, no single insurgent outfit can really claim to represent the wishes of the Naga people as a whole.

Quite often, while talking of the Naga struggle against the Indian state, one marks the tendency of treating the Nagas as one homogeneous whole. This, however, is an absolutely wrong approach .The strength of the Naga society lies in its variety of tribes and their distinct traditional structures. All these have combined under a particular historical process to give shape to a clear Naga identity. Therefore, it would be a grave mistake to try to merge all these distinct identities under the umbrella of one organization—the NSCN (I–M). The very democratic structure of Naga society, made up as it is of so many different tribes, would not permit this. Hence, even as the talks proceed it would be imperative for Naga civil-society groups to try to work out a formula to resolve the main points of difference that exist between the major underground factions and overground political groups. The need to work out a dialogue amongst themselves is perhaps as important as working out a settlement with the Indian government, precisely because in today's situation no single group can really claim a hegemonic status. There is a consensus about a united Naga nation. But this united Naga nation would not be under the hegemony of any particular organization. Rather it would be a synthesis of the traditional and the modern, of divergent viewpoints and attitudes where the sanctity of both social and individual space of the different Naga tribes as well as the minorities would be ensured. This is exactly what the civil society groups led by the Naga Hoho have been trying to achieve.

The question of a durable peace in Nagaland and the northeastern region is, therefore, inextricably linked to factors such as land, territoriality, cultural autonomy, and political freedom in relation not only to

the different Naga tribes but also in relation to the other nationalities of the region. There is always the danger of supporting one cause and antagonizing another. Although there have been tension points between the different communities from time to time, for example Nagas-Kukis, Nagas-Assamese, Nagas-Meiteis, and so on, yet it was the Naga cease-fire without territorial limits that virtually opened the Pandora's Box. The question of territoriality assumed a new significance. The map, which the British had introduced for the first time, has become a major bone of contention between the different nationalities of the region. Prior to the coming of the British, the idea of a well-defined territory for the Naga or the other tribes was virtually non-existent. It has, therefore, been a long journey from the Naga 'village republic' to the concept of a unified Nagalim covering some 120,000 kilometres of land which would include all those who consider themselves to be Nagas, irrespective of whether they reside in Assam, Manipur, or Arunachal. The 16-Point Agreement did have a clause which stated that if they so desired, the Nagas in other parts could come together. All Naga organizations within and outside Nagaland are unanimously one on this point. But the colonial administration has left its mark and certain boundaries have been defined and accepted in such a manner that changes in them could trigger a major crisis in the entire region.

Manipur is already quite tense with the United Committee of Manipur (UCM) declaring an 'emergency' to deal with the situation that has arisen out of T. Muivah's statement in New Delhi that since he was born in Ukhrul, it is a part of Nagalim. The UCM is of the view that the Centre has assured the NSCN (I–M) leadership that as part of the deal, the three Naga-populated districts of Manipur, namely Ukhrul, Tamenglong, and Senapati, would be made part of Nagaland. The merging of these districts with a greater Nagaland would reduce Manipur's territory by more than half. The Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad of Assam has also declared that not an inch of Assam's territory would be ceded to the Nagas and that if the Centre tries to redraw the state's boundaries, then a 'thousand Muivahs will be born in Assam'.

Thus we see that two of the most important issues that need to be resolved through negotiations are: (a) the question of Naga sovereignty/self-determination, and (b) the question of a unified Nagalim/

Greater Nagalim. One witnessed how the entire northeastern region was thrown into turmoil over the second issue. But for the very positive efforts of the Naga Hoho and other civil-society organizations, there could have been widespread violence in Nagaland and the neighbouring states. It goes to the credit of the Naga Hoho and the other organizations that their active intervention prevented the outbreak of violence and in this, they set an example for the entire country to emulate. The ceasefire without territorial limits proved that the issue of territoriality could be a highly sensitive one and could lead to severe inter-community clashes. But the NSCN (I–M) has given no indication till date about any rethinking on the question of a Greater Nagalim. Rather, both Isaac Swu and Muivah have asserted that they are not at all prepared to give up their demand for the integration of all-Naga-inhabited areas as also that for a sovereign Nagalim. And in this the NSCN (I–M) has the support of all sections of political opinion in Nagaland, including that of Chief Minister Jamir and his Congress Party. Therefore, to suggest that the NSCN may not finally press for Greater Nagalim in its talks with the Government of India and decide to settle for greater autonomy within the present geographical area of the state of Nagaland would be totally unrealistic.

That leaves us with what may be termed the central point of the debate—the question of Naga sovereignty or self-determination. Ever since the NNC formed the Federal Government of Nagaland, the question of an independent, sovereign Nagaland has been raised. Prior to India's independence, however, the NNC was not very clear on this point. Even afterwards there were times when during written exchanges between the NNC and the Government of India (particularly Nehru), the former seemed to emphasize the need for maximum internal autonomy. Moreover, the NNC position has been that since the Nagas never formed part of India, the question of secession did not arise. They were to be left to determine their own way of life. Whatever the legalities involved in the NNC's position on self-determination/sovereignty, the situation today is such that a separate, independent Nagaland outside the Indian Union does not appear feasible.

There has been a major shift in the international arena regarding the right of self- determination, with the emphasis being laid more on internal self-determination which ensures maximum political autonomy as

against external self-determination or secession. It would be relevant to note here that the Peace Mission too, while acknowledging that the Naga struggle was a 'national' one, laid stress on the Nagas' continuing relationship with India in a polity which would ensure them maximum autonomy. The 16-Point Agreement and the subsequent constitutional provision regarding Nagaland could be said to be some such steps to ensure autonomy. Rev Michael Scott, in a note prepared in 1965 titled 'Bearings on the Future of Nagaland', had asked the Nagas to consider what they really meant by independence and said that 'independence conceded to Nagaland might stimulate secessionist tendencies, which would threaten the integrity of India as a whole'. Referring to the Naga demand for independence, Scott had remarked:

> What does India require of Nagaland other than the security of the border? Far from exacting tribute from the Nagas, the flow is rather from India to Nagaland in the form of a large proportion of its annual revenue ... As compared with African or colonial territories, Nagaland under the present set-up has the ownership of land and settlement under its control. Nagas cannot be forcibly or constitutionally deprived of their land as the indigenous people of South Africa for example have been deprived ... Education, health and finance are subjects under Naga jurisdiction.

He referred to the question of economic viability of Nagaland as an independent nation and said: 'If Nagaland, in its present stage of development, has not the economic resources enabling it to be independent in this real sense of the word, Naga leaders would be honest and realistic if they face these facts of life and pursue a policy which, while bringing peace to the people, will also give a reasonable prospect of achieving progress...' These are the words of a person who was seen as being very sympathetic to the Naga struggle. Much of what Scott said seems relevant to the present situation.

The question of self-determination, therefore, will have to be tackled from a practical angle by those involved in the talks. The international scenario is today in favour of resolution of ethnic and nationalistic conflicts through peaceful means. September 11 has brought about a major change in the Western world's perception of the struggles of small nationalities especially in third world countries. The shift in the position of the United States (US) and that of several European countries on the question of self-determination of nations has sharply

affected the course and content of the struggles of small nationalities fighting for independent homelands. In a statement in this regard, US Undersecretary of State, Strobe Talbot has stressed: 'we are trying to define and apply the concept of self-determination in a way that is conducive of integration and not disintegration: in a way that will lead to lasting peace than recurrent war'. Developments in Sri Lanka could be cited as a pointer. The swiftly changing international scenario is clearly one of the major reasons why the NSCN (I–M) has opted for talks with the Indian government and expressed its commitment to a negotiated settlement of the Naga issue. It remains to be seen if and how it revises its position on self-determination/sovereignty of the Naga people. Although till date, the official position of the NSCN (I–M) says that it is committed to a sovereign, independent Nagalim, yet the indications are only too clear that greater autonomy and not sovereignty would be the issue that would have to be hammered out at the coming talks.

It would be wrong to pin too much hope on the current visit to India of the NSCN (I–M) leadership. Yet from the statements of the NSCN (I–M) leadership it seems clear that already quite some headway has been made in the direction of finally solving the almost intractable problem. The most positive outcome of the visit is the NSCN (I–M) statement that there would be no more fighting between Indian forces and the Nagas and that it would not call for a boycott of the coming polls in Nagaland. In this connection one may refer to a significant part of the statement of the Naga International Support Centre (NISC) which reads:

> NISC would like to clarify the stand on the election being held in Nagaland next month. Non-interference with this election means that the NSCN does not call for a boycott nor will it meddle in it. Elections don't solve the longstanding problem, solution does. This is what the people demanded in 1998 and though the boycott was successful, a state government was sworn in, a state government that did not reflect the will of the people. That is why this time the people decided to participate in this election and not to boycott it. For the time being and until a final solution between the Government of India and the Nagas has been arrived at, the people will then be able to run the state according to their wishes.

Since the NISC is a human-rights group closely associated with the NSCN (I–M), it seems clear from the above statement that the NSCN

has ultimately decided to accept the elections in Nagaland as a more or less democratic exercise involving the voluntary participation of the Naga people. One feels that the NSCN (I–M)'s decision not to call for a boycott of the February polls and its acceptance of the democratic process within the ambit of the Indian constitution is a very important departure from its earlier position on elections in Nagaland. This is indeed a major gain for all those who are striving for the restoration of peace in Nagaland through a negotiated settlement of the Naga issue. It is, therefore, imperative that the dialogue should continue. In this the civil-society organizations, both within and outside Nagaland, have a leading role to play.

III Assam

Towards a Viable Peace or a Cul-de-sac?*

The peace process between the Centre and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) seems to have hit a roadblock. When in September 2005 the Centre declared a unilateral halt to security operations which was followed by the ULFA's announcement of the formation of the People's Consultative Group (PCG), people's expectations about a negotiated settlement to the three-decade-old militancy in Assam reached a new high. As insisted upon by the militant outfit, the Centre made the first move towards a dialogue by suspending military operations and the stage seemed to have been finally set for a serious dialogue between New Delhi and the ULFA. The people responded to the peace developments by rallying behind the PCG and giving its members a huge send-off when they left for the national capital to begin their first parleys with the Central government. One was reminded of the reception given to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland [NSCN (I–M)] leaders, Isaak Chisi Swu and Thingueling Muivah, when they came to

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New Delhi in 2004 and were virtually treated as State guests and began their itinerary by placing wreaths on the samadhi of Mahatma Gandhi. It appeared that history was about to repeat itself and the insurgency in Assam would finally be wrapped up as it was done in Mizoram in or as was being attempted in the case of the Nagas who are credited with continuing the oldest insurgent movement of the country. But that was not to be. History was about to repeat itself this time as farce. After several rounds of discussions between the Centre and the PCG, the talks finally got stalled over the question of sovereignty, with the ULFA insisting that the question of a sovereign Assam must find place in the agenda for the talks and the Government of India saying that there could be no talks outside the ambit of the Constitution.

Even as the discussions between the Centre and the PCG were on, the ULFA indicated in the November 2005 editorial of its mouthpiece, *Freedom,* that the future course of the negotiations would depend on; (a) the Centre's willingness to disclose the details about its cadres which went missing during the All-Clear Operation carried out by the Royal Bhutanese Army in December 2003; (b) the release of its front-ranking leaders lodged in Assam jails; and (c) a stop to the operations being carried out by the 'illegal Indian occupation forces'. The ULFA, in the same issue of its mouthpiece, commended the PCG for bringing into focus the issue of a sovereign Assam. The militant outfit also accused the Centre and the State governments of quietly encouraging fake encounters in which several of its activists were gunned down by the security forces. On its part, New Delhi accused the ULFA of taking undue advantage of the suspension of operations to regroup and increase its strength. It asked the ULFA to prove its seriousness by naming the date, locale, and the composition of its delegation for direct talks with the Centre. The ULFA responded by stepping up its terror attacks on civilian targets and carrying out a spate of bomb blasts throughout the state. In such an atmosphere it was but inevitable for the talks to break down and in September 2006, exactly a year after they had begun, the peace process was called off by the Centre and security operations against the banned outfit were resumed in full swing.

It is now almost a year since the peace talks were called off and, given the present situation in the state, the possibility of resumption of negotiations in the near future appears quite bleak. The question that

is being frequently asked in Assam is—why is the Centre so reticent to talk to the ULFA when it is agreeable to discuss even the question of sovereignty with the Naga rebels? A strong argument is being floated these days that if the Centre can hold so many rounds of talks with the Naga rebels and that too at foreign locations, what is it that is actually preventing it from opening a meaningful dialogue with the ULFA? The ULFA in the September 2007 issue of its mouthpiece, *Freedom*, has accused New Delhi of willingly procrastinating over the peace process despite the fact that the former has agreed for negotiations without insisting on the talks being held in a foreign country or in the presence of international observers. The ULFA's position has been echoed by several political groups, student and youth organizations, and sections of civil society within Assam. But before one accuses the Centre of being unduly harsh to the ULFA rebels while it is going out of the way to keep the 10-year-old peace parleys with the NSCN (I–M) on track, it would be necessary to try to understand a few things related to the two movements, the structure of the organizations involved, the nature of the peace parleys, and the role of civil society. And, for that, one would also have to go back a bit in history and try to look into some of the specifics of the Naga Movement which is easily the most protracted insurgent movement in the country's post-independence history. A brief comparison of the two movements would perhaps help us understand better the inherent weaknesses in the peace process in Assam and why it has failed to take off.

To begin with, it would perhaps be relevant to discuss the structure of organizations like the Naga National Council (NNC) and compare and contrast it with that of the ULFA. It may be recalled that during the initial phase of the Naga Movement in the 1950s when it was led by the NNC, the division of powers between the political and armed wings of the Naga Federal Government was quite clear. Decisions taken by the Naga Federal Army had to be ratified by the political wing and the Tatar Hoho, the highest political body. But even as the Naga struggle advanced and fault lines began to appear in the face of the Indian State's manoeuvres as well as because of the inner contradictions and inter-tribe rivalries within the movement, the political wing was gradually marginalized and the armed wing took over. This process continued and finally, when in 1980 the NNC split and the NSCN was born, the

latter emerged primarily as a militaristic outfit. Nevertheless, it was the NNC which, through its 'plebiscite' of 1951 and the successful boycott of the general elections of 1952, had created a mass base for the organization—something which has sustained the NSCN (I–M) till today. In a follow-up to the election boycott, the Naga National Council had also carried out an active non cooperation movement in the then Naga Hills district of Assam during which the *gaonburas* or village headmen returned their traditional red blankets and all official functions were boycotted. The Naga federal set-up under the NNC was well planned and drew its strength from the traditional village institutions which were an integral part of Naga society. It is interesting to note that Phizo laid the foundations of the Naga struggle by winning over the traditional structures of power ranging from the village council to the Tatar Hoho. He ensured that the emerging Naga middle-class leadership of the NNC didn't come into conflict with the village chiefs and village councils. Without the support from these traditional structures of power, Phizo certainly would not have been able to build up an organization which successfully resisted the might of the Indian State over half a century. (There is, however, a strong point of view which suggests that Phizo's dependence on the traditional power structures was one of the main reasons contributing to the rise of inter-tribe rivalry within the organization. That, however, would call for a separate discussion and is beyond the scope of this article.)

The NNC took great care to spread its organizational network among the women and youth and this brought in rich dividends. The overall fact that emerges from this is that the NNC tried to test the people's will through several mechanisms and thereby laid the foundations of a proactive civil society with strong roots in the traditional structures of power. Though one cannot vouchsafe for the fact that all the Nagas who put their signatures or thumb impressions during the 'plebiscite' of 1951 were in favour of an independent Naga homeland as envisaged by the NNC, yet the entire exercise was one of mass mobilization—something which had never been attempted before in the Naga Hills where most of the tribes had a history of mutual warfare. It was through these efforts which brought the different tribes on a common platform and by adopting an agenda of direct struggle against the Government of India that the NNC under Phizo succeeded in laying the foundations

of modern Naga nationalism in which Naga civil society came to play a determining role. It is significant that in today's scenario in Nagaland where democratic representative forms have come to function quite effectively, Naga civil society continues to draw its strength from both the traditional structures of power and the representative forms of power. It is these civil society organizations ranging from the village councils to the Naga Mothers Association and the Naga Hoho that have come to play a determining role in the Naga peace process. No militant outfit in today's Nagaland, however strong it might be, can really afford to neglect the organized view of these civil-society groups. If the peace process in Nagaland continues today despite so many hurdles, it is largely because the collective opinion of the of the Naga people for a peaceful and negotiated settlement of the Naga issue is so well articulated by the civil-society groups of the state. The Naga civil-society groups have reached this position because of their proactive stand against both state and militant violence. Attacks on civilians by militants have always drawn the ire of the civil society groups and this has often acted as a check on civilian killings. This is surely not to suggest that militancy in Nagaland has not had its share of civilian victims. Elimination of political rivals and critics of the underground factions have been quite common since the early days of the insurgency and there is no doubt that in the entire period of Naga insurgency, hundreds of civilians have lost their lives in intra-tribal and inter-group struggles as well as in reprisal killings. But these killings cannot be compared with the type of ethnic killings that seems be part of the ULFA's agenda, especially in its systematic targeting of Hindi-speaking civilians over the past few years. Also, there is a sharp difference in tactics and strategy between the two organizations. While the ULFA has been carrying out countless bomb blasts throughout the state which have claimed hundreds of innocent civilian lives, none of the NSCN factions have adopted such terror tactics. During the early years of the insurgency, the Naga underground was suspected of having carried out a series of blasts in trains passing through Assam. Assam Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha had resigned from the Naga Peace Mission in protest against these blasts. But in the subsequent decades of the Naga struggle such terror strikes cannot be seen. One may refer to the Naga–Kuki clashes which claimed hundreds of lives and which the NSCN(I–M) played a major role. But

whatever the magnitude of the human tragedy involved, these killings were more in the nature of brutal inter-community clashes primarily over the possession of land and cannot be equated with the random terror strikes being carried out by the ULFA against the civilian population with the primary intention of destabilizing the government by eroding its credibility in the eyes of the people.

By contrast, when one examines the present militant struggle led by the ULFA and tries to draw parallels with the Naga struggle, one discovers that at no stage whatsoever did the ULFA consider it necessary to test the people's will. Nor has it seriously considered it necessary to maintain any close liaison with the people whom it claims it is fighting to liberate from the Indian 'colonial yoke'. Barring some initial attempts to set up a mass overground organization named as the Jatiya Unnayan Parishad, the ULFA has always nourished a highly-secretive militaristic set-up which leaves almost no scope either for inner-party democracy or for establishing any rapport with the people. Although during the formative years of the organization several ULFA ideologues did try to communicate with the people on some major issues through the columns of regional newspapers, but the precedence on the armed wing must have marginalized the ideologues which ceased to have any influence. The dominance of the armed wing has led to serious ideological weaknesses which have been reflected in the outfit's growing alienation from the masses. Greater reliance on the gun than in winning over the confidence of the people has resulted in terror becoming the main weapon in its struggle against the Indian State as also in maintaining discipline within its ranks. The ULFA has never considered itself as being accountable to the people and this has resulted in its being increasingly isolated and pushed into a more and more narrow terrorist groove. If one were to judge by the content of its statements, it seems that the ULFA tries to justify its terror strikes by taking the people for granted. It has invariably tried to justify its terrorist strikes in the name of the people. This, to say the least, is a highly erroneous standpoint and has progressively alienated the masses from the policies and programmes of the organization, so much so that the outfit now stands hugely discredited before the people. There is a total absence of any critical dialogue between the militant organization and the people. This is in sharp contrast to the situation prevailing in Nagaland where

issues raised by the underground are intensely debated in civil-society platforms. In the absence of any dialogue between the militants and civil society, it is inevitable that the militant groups embark on terrorist attacks on innocent civilians and try to survive through extortion and intimidation. It has been observed that that the agenda and strategy of militant groups often attain greater focus in the course of the struggle, particularly if such a group succeeds in maintaining its rapport with the people. Just the opposite seems to be the case with the ULFA which is not known to provide any space for debate within the organization and considers it virtually unnecessary to ascertain in any form the wishes of the people whom it wants to 'liberate'. On the contrary, it tends to dismiss summarily any suggestions or criticisms offered by civil society groups and this has been amply revealed in its responses to moves made by organizations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha or the Asom Satra Mahasabha, not to speak of the student and youth organizations. The lack of critical debate within the organization and its aversion to criticism from civil-society bodies often leads to a situation where the militant outfit grows totally intolerant of any dissident voice and likes to listen only to its own coterie of supporters within the civil society.

Such a situation is very different from the one prevailing today in Nagaland where the militant groups are engaged in meaningful dialogue with civil-society organizations—be it the issue of sovereignty versus greater autonomy or that of territorial integration of the Naga people. Though Nagaland is passing through a phase of factional violence involving the underground groups, yet it can be safely surmised that type of violence let loose by the ULFA on innocent civilians wouldn't just be possible in Nagaland because of the large degree of interaction there between the underground and the people. Although there may exist serious points of disagreement over some of the tactics being used or over the factional fights between the two segments of the NSCN or there could also be differences along tribe lines, yet more than 50 years of Naga struggle has created a situation where civil society and elected representatives do not hesitate to openly support some of the major demands of the militants. For instance, this was evident when Nagas cutting across tribe, clan and political loyalties supported the NSCN (I-M)'s demand for the unification of all the Naga tribes. Even the elected representatives passed an unanimous resolution in the

Assembly on this issue. This, however, has not prevented civil society organizations from criticizing the underground outfits when they have engaged themselves in factional killings or in eliminating their rivals.

In any peace process, civil society is bound to play a crucial role. The experience of peace processes in conflict situations in different parts of the world suggests that there are moments in particular peace negotiations when civil-society intervention proves very meaningful. But civil society in Assam is relatively weak and disorganized than it is in states like Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. Even Meghalaya which till recently could not boast of any vibrant civil-society organizations seems to be much ahead of Assam. Even since the civil society voice in Assam got stifled because of the partisan positioning adopted by the major civil-society organizations during those heady days of the Assam Movement, the recovery has been slow and painful. Both state and militant violence for almost three decades now have severely reduced civil-society space in Assam. It is significant that over the years of ULFA-led insurgency, the efforts to broker a peace between the militants and the government by some of the major civil-society organizations of the state like the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS) and the Asom Satra Mahasabha (ASM) have not met with any success. Also, unlike in Nagaland, these organizations have been looked upon with doubt and suspicion by the militant outfit. There have, no doubt, been spontaneous upsurges of people time and again to protest killings by the state as well as by the militants. But there is clearly the absence of a viable and coordinated civil-society voice in Assam. This is bound to be a major drawback in pushing ahead the peace process.

When the ULFA announced the formation of the PCG consisting primarily of civil-society activists sympathetic to the ULFA cause, there were expectations that the PCG would be able to move out of its narrow partisan groove and develop into a representative civil-society organization of the state. In fact, during its initial phase, the PCG has expressed its desire to reach out to the people and ascertain their views on the issue of insurgency and a sovereign Assam. But the people's expectations soon gave way to a cynical sense of despair when it became clear that the PCG, instead of trying to emerge as the coordinated voice of Assamese civil society, was increasingly trying to push forward the ULFA's viewpoint. This became all the more clear when the PCG floated the umbrella organization called the People's Committee for

Peace Initiative (PCPI) with the aim of building up a mass movement ostensibly to highlight the State's violation of human rights but actually intended to consolidate the pro-ULFA forces and push forward the programme of the militant outfit. This obviously led to differences with the constituent groups of the PCPI, with several of them disassociating from the organization. In fact, many of the organizations which took part in mass demonstrations against State repression and violation of human rights by the security forces were ideologically opposed to what ULFA stands for. The story of the PCG is one of lost opportunities. Although it was a ULFA-nominated body, yet it had received wide support from the people of the state who had hoped that there would now be finally a return to peace through a negotiated settlement. Instead of limiting its brief to facilitating a direct dialogue between the ULFA and the Centre, the PCG took upon itself the task of highlighting the issue of sovereignty, something for which it won accolades from the ULFA leadership. But this clearly alienated the PCG from other civil-society groups and organizations which had their clear reservations on this issue. Moreover, the PCG tried to pass off the people's enthusiasm for peace and their anger against State repression as support for the ULFA's agenda of a *Swadhin* Asom. Therefore, it may be said that the partisan positioning of the PCG was primarily responsible for its marginalization in the peace. It failed to emerge as a civil-society initiative independent of the ULFA and when the ULFA continued with its killing spree of Hindi-speaking people, the PCG beat a hasty retreat and pulled itself out of the peace process. Thus, within a year of its formation, the PCG became virtually irrelevant, with the Centre insisting on direct talks with the banned outfit and the state Chief Minister making it clear that there was no further scope for facilitators. Thereby, a particular chapter in the peace process which could have opened up plenty of possibilities came to a close. Right now, peace seems to be a distant possibility in Assam. The spate of recent terror attacks launched by the ULFA in the form of bomb blasts in different parts of the state and its gunning down of Hindi-speaking civilians seem to suggest that successive security operations against the militant outfit have not been effective in decimating its striking power. Rather, reports indicate that in recent months the ULFA has been successful in getting new recruits despite scores of its leading cadres having been killed by the security forces. The dismal economic scenario of the region combined with the

failure of the State to ensure distributive justice and the rule of law—two of the fundamental premises of democracy—have been contributing towards keeping armed militancy alive in the state. With ideology having taken a backseat and the question of accountability before the people having lost its relevance because of ever shrinking popular support for its cause, the ULFA is increasingly relying on terror tactics to assert its existence. This, in turn, would make it all the more difficult for the organization to open a dialogue with the Centre.

A brief look at the history of the peace process in Nagaland will help us see how different it is from what is going on in Assam. Though efforts to bring about a cessation of hostilities in the Naga Hills district had begun in the late 1950s following wide-scale army operations involving a large degree of human rights violations, yet the process took final shape only after the birth of Nagaland state in December 1963. A few months later in May 1964, at the initiative of the Council of Naga Baptist Churches, the Naga Peace Mission was formed. It had as its members Shri Jayaprakash Narayan, Reverend Michael Scott, and the then Assam Chief Minister Shri Bimala Prasad Chaliha. The Peace Mission was the first civil-society initiative in a conflict situation in post-independence India and had the support of a large cross-section of the Naga people. Interestingly, not a single member of the Peace Mission was a Naga and this shows the deep trust and faith that the Naga people had on the integrity and sense of purpose of the three persons who made up the mission. The Peace Mission's efforts led to the first official ceasefire between the forces of the NNC/Naga Federal Government and those of the Government of India in September 1964. In December of the same year, the Peace Mission submitted its proposals wherein it clearly and unambiguously stated that the Naga struggle was a 'national struggle'. The Peace Mission acknowledged the right of self-determination of the Nagas, but asked them to voluntarily opt to be a part of the Indian Union. The Peace Mission, by acknowledging the 'national' content of the Naga struggle, set a new dimension to the Indian State's understanding of the struggle of different ethnic nationalities for greater political within a restructured Indian federal polity. It goes to the credit of men like Jayaprakash Narayan and perhaps even more so for a Chief Minister of an Indian state to openly state that the Nagas were fighting for self-determination. Like our present day politicians, they weren't afraid of saying what they felt to be true. But this

Peace Mission which for the first time threw open a totally new perspective to the Naga struggle for the rest of the country, was not nominated by the NNC and at no stage did the Naga underground use its weight to try to influence its way of thinking. It is, however, a different matter that both Jayaprakash Narayan and Chaliha resigned their membership of the Peace Mission in 1966. Narayan resigned because he thought he had lost the trust of the Naga underground, while Chaliha resigned in protest against a series of bomb blasts in trains passing through Assam in Lumding and Diphu, suspected to have been carried out by the Naga underground. Nevertheless, it was the Peace Mission which gave a totally new perspective to the Naga struggle and taught the rest of India to see it primarily as a political issue. Although since the Peace Mission initiated the first ceasefire between the NNC and the Government of India in 1964, peace has eluded Nagaland for decades and it was only in 1997 that another ceasefire was concluded between the Government of India and the NSCN (I–M), yet today the very process that was initiated in the 1960s has resulted in the series of negotiations between New Delhi and the NSCN (I–M) wherein the Government of India has expressed willingness even to discuss radical amendments to the country's constitution and to redraw the parameters of Indian federalism to provide greater autonomy for the Nagas. As for the NSCN (I–M), it too seems to have realized that negotiating peace means making strategic adjustments which may involve even the redefining of the concept of self-determination in the light of recent international developments. This is no mean achievement both for the Naga underground as well as for the Indian State. Therefore, before drawing parallels between the Naga and Assam peace processes, one must keep in mind the fact that the former has a much longer history and tradition of peace-making which is a highly intricate process. And, it also needs to be remembered that the Naga peace process has drawn substantively from the experiences and findings of non-partisan peace initiatives like that of the Peace Mission and this has helped the emergence of an independent civil space in Nagaland. But, in the case of Assam, the first ever major initiative for peace at the civil-society level was appropriated by a body nominated by the ULFA and which could not get out of the groove of partisan politics.

However, a positive development in the peace process in Assam has been the initiative taken by non-partisan civil-society groups to bring

the two sides to the conflict to the negotiating table. With the PCG reduced to a non-actor, other civil and political organizations are bound to step in and continue with their search for a peaceful settlement to the violence that has claimed thousands of lives and has severely restricted the civil and democratic rights of the average citizen because of legislations like the Disturbed Areas Act and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. The success of civil-society initiative would depend on convincing the militant organization to abjure violence and come forward with a concrete set of proposals to be discussed with the Centre. But the question would naturally arise: How far is the ULFA prepared to sit for a prolonged series of talks with the Centre? What would really be the subject matter of the talks? In 28 years of armed struggle the ULFA, apart from harping on the twin themes of sovereignty and colonial occupation/exploitation, has not been able to come out with any clear idea about the national question in Assam nor has it thrown up for debate any particular economic agenda for the region. In a state with a highly heterogeneous mix of ethnic groups and communities, mere insistence on a Swadhin Asom is bound to take it nowhere. It is certain that the Government of India will not compromise on the basic question of sovereignty and this is what the Naga underground has realized after a decade of ceasefire and protracted peace negotiations. Moreover, in the past few years, international public opinion has registered a major change in its position regarding terms like sovereignty and self-determination, with emphasis being increasingly laid on working out agreements which would provide greater political and economic autonomy within the framework of the nation-state. This has been one of the reasons why the NSCN (I–M) is growing increasingly amenable to the idea of a Nagalim with greater autonomy within the Indian Union, although officially it still sticks to its demand for a sovereign Naga homeland. Surely, engaging in peace parleys with a government which has had plenty of experience in dealing with insurgency of varying shades will not be an easy matter for the ULFA. Quite often negotiating peace proves to be more difficult than carrying on an armed struggle against the state. If the Naga insurgents, who have the backing of a cross-section of the Naga people on certain major issues including that of a unified and greater Nagalim, are finding it so difficult to steer themselves through the peace process, one can well imagine the hurdles that the ULFA is likely to face if ever negotiations were to be

held between the New Delhi. In one of the recent issues of its mouthpiece, *Freedom* (September 2007) the ULFA has accused the Centre of procrastination and has stuck to its earlier position regarding the talks. The issue of sovereignty remains the central issue. This shows that there has been no change in the ULFA's position and that it continues to view Assam as being under Indian 'colonial' rule. Given such a position and the insurgent outfit's continuing spree of violence including bomb blasts and attacks on Hindi-speaking civilians, the possibility of a peace dialogue appears rather uncertain. Reports about the outfit's close links with fundamentalist terrorist groups operating from Bangladesh (which the ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa has denied) have further complicated the issue. The ULFA must accept the fact that the idea of a sovereign Assam has been effectively rejected by the overwhelming majority of the people of the region and it would be wishful thinking on its part to continue to nourish the illusion that the people's overwhelming desire for peace and their anger at the violation of human rights is an indication of support for its cause. Therefore, mere insistence on the part of political parties and civil-society groups that peace parleys be resumed with the insurgent outfit is not going to be of much help. The demands of realpolitik are rather uncompromising. High hopes have always to be balanced with hard realities. Otherwise, the road to peace could end in a cul-de-sac.

IV Army Killings in Assam*

Dozens of youth have been killed by the army in fake encounters in Assam and the people have lost all faith in the eyewash enquiries conducted by the state administration into these killings. The Guwahati High Court has ordered the Director General of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to conduct an inquiry into the deaths of five young

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men in an alleged encounter with the security forces in the Doom Dooma region of Upper Assam in February last year. The court, acting on a writ petition filed by an All Assam Students Union (AASU) leader, also directed that the inquiry be conducted by an official not below the rank of Superintendent of Police (SP) and that the report be submitted within three months. This is the first time that the high court has ordered a CBI inquiry into killings by the security forces in Assam. The High Court order comes at a time when the army's profile in the northeast has hit a new low particularly after the recent shootout by the Rashtriya Rifles at Kohima which left eight people, including two school children, dead and over 20 injured. On 15 February 1994, Rameshwar Singh, General Manager of the Assam Frontier Tea Company was gunned down in his office at the Talap Tea Estate by suspected ULFA extremists. Singh was apparently on good terms with the ULFA 'boys' and had not received any threats. Some, however, tried to link the murder with the arrest of a ULFA activist from Singh's office chambers few days earlier, while some discussion was going on. Following the gunning down of the tea official, the security forces started rounding up several young men in and around the surrounding villages of Talap. Between 17–19 February, nine youths were picked up by the personnel of the 18 Punjab Regiment. Most of them were petty contractors and garden suppliers and had come into contact with Rameshwar Singh at some stage or the other. Among those picked up was Prabin Sonowal, advisor to AASU's Tinsukia unit. The others were Akhil Sonowal, Debajit Biswas, Bhupen Moran, Pradip Dutta, Prakash Sarmah, Manoranjan Das, Moteswar Moran, and Gunin Hazarika. Unable to locate the whereabouts of the arrested youth in the army camps at Dhola, Hathighuli, and Tinsukia, Pradip Dutta's father moved a habeas corpus petition in the Guwahati High Court. The court ordered on 22 February that the arrested youths be immediately produced before a magistrate. But, within 24 hours of the court order, the army authorities handed over the bodies of Prabin, Akhil, Debajit, Bhupen, and Pradip to the Tinsukia police, while the other four were let off.

The army's version of the incident was that the five persons were killed in an encounter which took place in the Dibru-Saikhowa reserve forest on the night of 21–22 February. It stated that a large cache of ammunition was recovered, but no weapons. Later, unable to explain the 24-hour delay in handing over the bodies to the police, an officer

stated that the encounter occurred on the night of 22–23 February. The police, however, had a different story. At first it said that the encounter took place at Kaitia village, and later on placed it at Rangdoi in the Dibru-Saikhowa reserve forest. There were few takers for the army's version of the encounter because of the telltale marks of torture on the bodies of the victims. The photographs carried by the press revealed that the five persons had been subjected to sustained torture. Interestingly, the government of Assam declared that it had no information about those killed having any links with the ULFA and tried to pass off the incident as just another army operation. Dispur ordered a magisterial-level inquiry into the incident and tried to distance itself from it, particularly in view of the public outrage and the blanket condemnation by all opposition political groups and organizations. The mass cremation of the five youths was attended by thousands of people and the 36-hour Assam bandh called by the AASU to protest against the killings evoked an unprecedented response throughout the state. The *Sentinel*, in its editorial of 25 February 1994, entitled 'It Was Murder in Cold Blood' declared: 'In a poignantly ironic translation of the Latin expression "habeas corpus", only the dead bodies were handed to the police! The one and the only conclusion that can be drawn out of this shocking episode is that the Army had killed the innocent youths in cold blood after subjecting them to third-degree torture'. Organizations like the Manab Adhikar Suraksa Samiti and the AASU consistently tried to draw the attention of national and international organizations as well as that of the centre to the incident. But the innumerable incidents of violence which occurred in the state in the succeeding months seemed to deflect public attention from the Dangari killings.

One year later, interest in the incident has been revived both by the Guwahati High Court order and the revelations made by an arrested ULFA activist in mid-March. Phuleswar Mahanta alias Biren Deuri told the police of his involvement in the murder of tea-garden manager Rameshwar Singh, thereby giving a new twist to the deaths in army custody of the five youths. Meanwhile, the Chief Minister declared in the state assembly that his government has not accepted the inquiry report submitted by the additional deputy commissioner, P. K. Goswami, on the killings in Dangari last year because the findings were 'not clear'. This report is said to have discounted the army's version of the incident. Obviously, the chief minister did not wish to state the facts of the case

before the assembly at a time when he was facing ever-increasing criticism for the violation of human rights in the state. The Chief Minister admitted in the assembly recently that there have been as many as 76 custodial deaths in the state since the promulgation of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) and that between January 1994 and February 1995, 21 persons had died in police custody. The opposition would, however, put the figure much higher, and its leader in the assembly pointed out that during Hiteswar Saikia's tenure 11 persons had died in army custody and 81 (including seven policemen and an army jawan) had been killed in encounters. Anyone marginally acquainted with the present Assam scene knows that dozens of youth have been killed in fake encounters and that the people have lost all faith in the eyewash enquiries conducted by the state administration.

Against this background the high court ruling on the Dangari killings comes as a welcome relief. The Guwahati High Court, in another order passed on the same date, held the army authorities responsible for the death of Manik Gogoi, an employee of Oil India, Duliajan. Gogoi had been picked up by the army in Guwahati on 2 March 1993. Acting on a habeas corpus petition, the court ordered on 2 April 1993 that Manik Gogoi be produced. But on 5 April 1993 the papers reported that Gogoi had been killed near Lekhapani. When the attention of the high court was drawn to this, it ordered an enquiry by a sessions judge. This enquiry refused to accept the army's version that Gogoi had been killed while trying to escape from a vehicle which was taking him to Duliajan from Lekhapani. Acting on the basis of the enquiry report, the high court has ordered the defence ministry to pay Rs 2.5 Lakhs as compensation to the family of Manik Gogoi and also to initiate measures to punish those responsible for the crime. These are indeed small mercies for all those who are today at the receiving end of an increasingly hostile and repressive state machinery.

V Assam
Roll Call of the Dead*

One of the most significant fallouts of the state and militant violence in Assam in the past 20 years has been the growing marginalization of the average citizen. However, the failure of the state as an institution and the rise of insurgency have created a situation where civil society must make use of what little democratic space is left and try to play a positive role. In this context it is useful to take note of the experience of civil-society interventions in Nagaland and Andhra Pradesh and draw lessons from it for Assam where the rollcall of the dead has been unending. If one were to go by the rate at which the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) cadres are being eliminated in 'encounters' by the security forces in Assam, then militancy should soon be a thing of the past. But that doesn't really seem to be the case. While it is true that right at present the ULFA seems to be on the run, reports indicate that the organization is not only regrouping in new bases but also going in for fresh recruits in a big manner. That the ULFA has not carried out militant strikes on security forces or on civilians in recent months need not be taken as a sign of it having second thoughts on its programme of armed struggle. It would be simplistic to suggest that the ULFA is on its way out. While it is true that in recent times, the ULFA has met with a series of setbacks and, more importantly, has increasingly lost popular support, yet there are signs that it is seriously rethinking its strategy. Its opposition of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and its indirect support to the Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samiti (SJSS), an umbrella organization of non-Bodo organizations opposed to the creation of BTC, is a pointer in this direction.

If official claims about the major weakening of the militant organization are true, then there was surely no need for all the panic at the government level about probable militant strikes coinciding with Independence Day. Also, what would one have to say about reports that the ULFA has recently teamed up with the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur and has arrived at a working arrangement

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with the Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) and the Dima Halim Daoga (DHD)? It is also stated to have come to an understanding of sorts with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). The UNLF of Manipur is easily one of the most resilient and best organized of the insurgent groups operating in the northeastern region and a tie-up of the ULFA with the UNLF could mean serious trouble for New Delhi and Dispur. If these reports are true, then official claims of having virtually broken the backbone of the organization need to be taken with a grain of salt. Every 'encounter' is claimed by the army as a blow to the ULFA and as a success of the security forces. But, given the ground reality, the question naturally arises: Are the tactics adopted by the Unified Command really giving results? And, are all those being killed by the security forces and the police in 'encounters' really 'dreaded ULFA militants' as they are made out to be? Not to speak of what eyewitnesses often have to say about these incidents, even if one were to read between the lines of the official accounts of the 'encounter deaths', it appears that many of those killed may, at some time or at some level, have been members of the banned outfit, while many others have just been eliminated on mere suspicion. Also that, in many cases, those killed in 'encounters' did not carry arms. Therefore, wouldn't such a policy of elimination send the wrong signals to those relatively moderate sections within the ULFA who would wish to arrive at a negotiated settlement of the problem?

Almost every other day there is news of militants being killed in encounters with the security forces. The following is a sample of news about 'encounter' deaths carried in a Guwahati daily in the past one and a half months:

> July 14: Troops of the Red Horns Division operating in Darrang district killed two hardcore Ulfa militants in an encounter on Saturday, stated an Army press release. On receipt of specific information from intelligence sources, an ambush was laid near village Nanipara under Paneri police station to nab the Ulfa militants. Suspected militants on being challenged lobbed a grenade and fired at the troops in an attempt to flee. In the retaliatory fire, two Ulfa militants were killed, whose identity is being ascertained. One 9 mm revolver with ammunition, one Chinese grenade ...were recovered from the slain militants.
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> July 15: The troops of the Red Horns Division of the Army, in a joint operation with the Assam Police killed two United Liberation Front of

Assam (ULFA) militants at Dighali village under Nalbari police station in Nalbari district last night, a PIB (Defence Wing) release states. A .32 pistol with ammunition and two Chinese grenades were recovered from the slain militants.

July 29: The out-lawed ULFA today received a major blow as the Red Horns Division of the Army killed four of its hardcore cadres, including a woman activist, at Ghagrapara in Nalbari district ... the encounter between the jawans of the Red Horns Division and the militants occurred at Patacharkuchi near Ghagrapara and after heavy exchange of fire, four militants were killed ... the army recovered a universal machine gun with 128 rounds of live ammunition, 10 kg of highly potential explosives, besides revolvers and Chinese-made hand grenades from the dead Ulfa militants.

July 30: Troops of the Red Horns Division of the Army shot dead two Ulfa militants at Rajapara village under the Boko police station after the ultras threw a hand grenade on the troops on being challenged. An AK-56 rifle and a Chinese hand grenade were recovered from the militants.

August 2: Two hard core Ulfa militants were killed in an encounter with the Army at Umananda village under Khairabari police station in Darrang district early today. Some live ammunition along with a Chinese made grenade were also recovered from the possession of the slained (sic!) militants.

August 12: ... troops of the Red Horns Division of the Army, in the wee hours of the morning shot dead an ULFA militant near Darrangamela in Nalbari district. A .22 revolver, two improvised explosive devices and some assorted ammunition were recovered from the slain militant.

August 14: ... troops of the Red Horns Division of the Army shot dead four ULFA militants in two separate incidents in the state in the wee hours ... the troops shot dead two unidentified ULFA militants near Sukhapara under Hajo police station in Kamrup district...In another incident near Dudhnoi in Goalpara district, the jawans of the same division shot dead two other ULFA cadres - Amrit Rabha and Manoj. An AK-56 rifle, a .38 US revolver, a magazine, an improvised i.e.d. weighing ten kg, six detonators, etc, were recovered in the two incidents.

Every report reads almost like a carbon copy of the other. Only the names of the militants (if they are at all indentified) and the place of occurrence are different. And, usually in these types of encounters, there doesn't seem to be any army casualties; else, the army dispatch would

have mentioned it. It is this unequal nature of the 'encounters' that have made people skeptical about the official versions of the incidents and quite often they have a different story to tell. For instance, reports published in a Guwahati-Assamese daily of 15 August stated that the two young men who were killed on the early morning of 14 August at Suklapara weren't ULFA cadres. Army personnel saw them near the railway line early in the morning and when asked to stop, they started running. The jawans fired and killed both the youth instantly. Since they were moving near the railway line, they were suspected of trying to commit sabotage. The local people have asserted that the young men were innocent and the police have stated that they might have been linkmen for the ULFA. It has been frequently alleged that young men have been eliminated in cold blood by the security forces. Leave aside ordinary ULFA cadres, even when an ULFA leader like Swadhinata Phukan was killed, it was alleged in the local press that he was shot dead by the police even as he raised his hands in surrender. Official versions of the incident were not accepted at all by the people. Recently too, when the ULFA commander Tapan Baruah was killed, it was alleged that he was shot in cold blood. But, unlike in earlier years when human rights violations by the state as well as by militants were widely covered by the local press, nowadays most of the regional newspapers as well as the English-language press published mainly from Guwahati seem content with publishing only the official versions of the incidents and make little effort to present the other version. Many would like to read in this a general disillusionment with the ULFA's policies and manner of functioning. But to turn a blind eye to the state's policy of elimination of the ultras could have an extremely damaging impact on the very precepts and practices on which the democratic functioning of the country rests. It is rather strange that the society in Assam with its long intellectual tradition, a vibrant regional press and a strong tradition of populist struggle, should today be so uncannily silent over the killings of its youth who, for whatever reasons, have taken to arms against the state. This is in sharp contrast to civil-society intervention in states like Nagaland, Mizoram, or Manipur. Today the civil society in these states has been mobilized to such a degree that no violation of human rights goes unrecorded and unprotested. At a time when Nagaland and Manipur have been successful in attracting international attention to human rights violations there, civil society in Assam has not been

able even to draw national attention to such violations by the security forces.

The negative impact of deploying the army for long periods to contain insurgency has been commented upon quite often. Army generals of the stature of General Cariappa were clearly against long-term use of the army to fight its own people. Experts too have commented that the use of the army for such purposes could have a long-term negative impact on the morale of the troops because in their day-to-day actions they would quite often be violating those very principles and values on which they have been brought up as army personnel—the basic values on which the democratic system of the country rests. And of these values, the rule of law is the foremost. Therefore, whatever be the nature of the challenge, it is this rule of law that has to be defended. Thus, one can well imagine the grave consequences of using security personnel as tools to carry out cold-blooded killings in insurgency-affected areas. This would not only further alienate the army from the civilian population but would also have a damaging psychological impact on the security personnel engaged in combating insurgency. There was a time when it was simply unthinkable that army personnel could be involved in human rights violations of their own people. For one always associated the army with the best ideals of service and honour. But the image of the army gradually underwent a change as it came to be deployed in insurgency-affected regions. Clearly, it was asked to take upon itself a job for which it was not trained. And, as we know, the results have not at all been encouraging. It all began with major human rights violations in the Naga Hills and in Kashmir in the 1950s. Since then there has been no going back. Today, the Indian Army's credentials have been badly affected especially in areas where it has been fighting armed militancy. It is true that the army has to operate in a difficult situation while combating insurgency and that it is doing a job for which it was not cut out. Yet one incident like that of Pathribal where reprisal killings of civilians took place following the massacre of Sikhs by Islamic militants at Chhatisinghpora in Kashmir is enough to damage the credibility of the army. That our own army personnel could so cold-bloodedly kill our own citizens speaks volumes about the negative impact of using the army to battle insurgency at home.

It is keeping in mind this negative impact that time and again senior army officers have expressed their reservations over the repeated use of

the army for long periods of time to tackle militancy and other law-and-order related problems. There has also been an attempt to sensitize the army personnel on the matter of the rights of the civilian population in insurgency-affected areas. As part of this effort, the army has been organizing seminars and discussions on human rights and this author attended one such seminar organized by the Commander of the Armed Forces (COAS) in New Delhi in 1996. The deliberations showed that the army top brass was genuinely concerned about the negative fallout of human rights violations, especially on the army itself. Some years ago, the chief of army staff also issued a set of instructions to army personnel deployed in combating internal insurgency. These are known as the 'Ten Commandments'. The first three of these commands say: (1) no rape, (2) no molestation, and (3) no inhuman torture. The other instructions call upon the army to respect human rights, to maintain good relationship with the media and to uphold the path of righteousness while serving the country. The very fact, that such instructions had to be issued to army personnel so many years after the country achieved freedom shows the actual state of affairs when it comes to army–civilian interaction in trouble-prone regions.

Today, despite all the assertions on human rights, the security forces deployed to combat insurgency or terrorism are often looked upon by the local population as an occupation army. This is all the more true for the northeastern region where the divide between security forces and the local population is made bigger by problems of language, culture, and lifestyle. And when the security forces become part of a state plan to simply eliminate the ultras, then this divide gets so much more reinforced. Since, for all practical purposes, it is a low-intensity war that is going on in this region between the security forces and the militants, people often come to accept the fact that those who have opted for armed struggle against the state would have to bear the brunt at some stage or other. Therefore, when there is a genuine encounter between militants and the security forces, and some militants get killed, the people respond to it as part of the ongoing struggle between the militants and the state. What, however, the people can never accept is the killing of unarmed youth, even if they be ultras—pulling them out of their beds at night and just shooting them. There is a similar reaction when militants gun down security personnel in non-combat situations. Both the Centre and the state governments have time and again been stress-

ing the need for a negotiated settlement of the problem of insurgency. Even senior army officers who have been in charge of anti-militancy operations in Assam and other states of the northeastern region, have emphasized the need for a political solution. There has also been talk of granting a general amnesty to the ultras. But somehow there has been no progress on this front. Some quarters would like to put the blame on the ULFA which has been rejecting the offer of talks, while others would like to say that it is the policy of the Unified Command in Assam which is responsible for the stalemate.

Whatever be the case, the government, because of its doublespeak, has not been able to send the right signals for a negotiated settlement. While on the one hand, it has been insisting on a dialogue with the militants, on the other hand it seems to be going ahead with its policy of exterminating the ultras. Briefing the parliamentary standing committee on home affairs, the then Union Home Secretary, Kamal Pande, had said a few months ago that the level of violence in the northeastern region had declined. In Assam's case, this is amply borne out by the decreasing number of militant attacks on security forces in the past one year or so. How then does one explain the rise in 'encounter' deaths? A quick survey of the figures of militants and security personnel killed in Assam over the past few years reveals that there has been an upswing in the case of the former. For instance, in the year 2000, the number of militants killed was 327 as against 65 security personnel and in 2001, the figures stood at 283 militants as against 59 security personnel. In the current year, up to April 2002, the number of militants killed has been 98, while two security men have lost their lives (Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines*, Vol. 12). While the militants killed belong not only to the ULFA but also to other organizations like the NDFB, yet it can be presumed that the majority of those killed, especially in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Barpeta, Tinsukia, and Dibrugarh were ULFA cadres or sympathizers.

It is exactly in this context that the question of civil society intervention arises. One of the most significant fallouts of state and militant violence that has hit Assam in the past 20 years or so has been the growing marginalization of the average citizen. It is true that time and again the voice of the civil society has been raised to protest the killings by militants as well as by the state and also against incidents of rape and murder. For instance, in the year 2000 when scores of non-Assamese civilians were

gunned down by suspected ULFA extremists in the districts of Sibsagar, Tinsukia, and Dibrugarh(although the ULFA did not claim responsibility for these), there was widespread expression of public indignation throughout the state. Also, there have been occasions when civil-society organizations in Assam have successfully protested against the ULFA's diktat to boycott Republic and Independence Day celebrations. But there seems to have been little of consistent effort on the part of the state's civil-society organizations to mobilize people's opinion against state killings and to create the ground for talks between the state and the militants. Civil liberty organizations like the Manab Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (MASS) made a good beginning. But it did not take long for its credentials to be affected because of its rather one-sided perspective on the matter of human rights. Assamese civil society, which at one time could boast of a high degree of awareness in the matter of civil rights, is today ominously silent on this score. Not to speak of the Left parties which once headed a strong civil-liberties movement and have now lapsed into total ennui and silence, even organizations like the AASU, the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS), and the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) which could have played a pivotal role in mobilizing the civil-society opinion on the matter of human rights do not seem to be worried at the rising curve of human-rights violations in the state. It needs to be noted that when the state fails as the principal agent of socio-economic transformation and cannot ensure distributive justice to its citizens, it tends to become increasingly coercive. Therefore, in order to understand the roots of militant violence in this region and to seek ways and means to resolve it through dialogue, one must consider the failure of the state to ensure socio-economic justice especially in the peripheral regions of the union and its emergence as an instrument of repression.

This repression is to be seen not only in relation to militancy but it also becomes a common feature of the everyday life of the citizen. In many insurgency-affected areas, the State has emerged as the major violator of human rights and some time back the Home Minister even talked of granting amnesty to military personnel found guilty of human-rights violations in these areas which are already covered by draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and the Disturbed Areas Act and which give the security forces virtual power of life and death over civilians. As already stated, State violence can never be seen as an

antidote to militant violence. In Assam today, both State and militant violence have contributed to the shrinking of the democratic space. Just like State violence, militant violence too has contributed largely towards the shrinking of the democratic space and in silencing the voice of civil society. There is no scope for any democratic space in the very organizational structure and mode of functioning of the insurgent groups, and the average citizen has nowhere to appeal to in case of insurgent violence. Moreover, organizations like the ULFA and the NDFB have never attempted to ascertain the wishes of the very people who they wish to 'liberate' from the Indian yoke. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that militant violence, however mindless it may be, is quite often the result of the failure of the State on the socio-economic front and that it must be seen as a political issue which must be resolved ultimately not through repression but by dialogue. It is obvious that the State in Assam today is not in a position to initiate such a dialogue. Where the State and the political parties have failed the people, the civil society naturally must step in. It is here that we may refer to civil-society interventions in Nagaland and Andhra Pradesh. Both these states have been affected by both militant and State violence ever since independence. While in neighbouring Nagaland, civil-society groups have taken the initiative in restoring peace to that strife-torn region, in Andhra Pradesh, an organization called the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) has, in recent months, succeeded in convincing both the government and the People's War activists to come to the negotiating table.

Over 50 years of insurgent violence and wide-scale state repression in Nagaland have resulted in politicizing the entire civil society to such an extent that in recent years it has come to play an increasingly decisive role in the peace process—a role in which the elected representatives have totally failed. Today there are scores of civil-society groups which keep an eye on both violations of human rights by both the State as well as by the militants, and have been working in close liaison with other groups in other parts of the country for the return of peace to that strife-torn state. It goes to the credit of these civil-society groups that all the passions released during the ceasefire declaration notwithstanding, the peace process was not derailed and the possible outbreak of inter-community violence was checked effectively. In achieving this, apart from the Naga Hoho, organizations like the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) played a pivotal role. Even the National Socialist Council of

Nagaland [NSCN (I–M)] has acknowledged its debt to the leaders of the country's civil society and especially that of Nagaland for highlighting the Naga issue. Civil-society intervention in Nagaland has reached such a stage that no organization, militant or otherwise, can afford to disregard the opinion, for instance, of the Naga Hoho, the Council of Baptist Churches, or the NMA. During those extremely difficult days following the violence in Manipur over the inclusion of the territorial clause in the extension of the Naga ceasefire, it was the intervention of the Naga Hoho and the NMA, among others, which prevented the outbreak of any violence in Nagaland. These organizations also took some very bold and meaningful steps to prevent the outbreak of hostility between the people of Nagaland and its neighbouring states. Nowhere else in the country perhaps, has civil-society intervention reaped such spectacular results. This augurs well for the rest of the country and especially for those areas where insurgent movements are on and democratic space is progressively shrinking. While attending a civil-society meeting in Nagaland recently, I realized how deep and decisive was the involvement of the civil-society groups in restoring normalcy in the state. This is a classic case where the state has failed and turned into an oppressor and the people have come forward to fill in the vacuum. The rest of the country and states like Assam in particular, have a lot to learn from the Naga experience in the mobilization of civil society.

In Andhra Pradesh too, civil-society intervention has proved effective in bringing the government and the People's War Group (PWG) to the negotiating table. The Andhra Pradesh experience is relevant for us in Assam. There too different civil rights groups, including the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), had consistently highlighted human rights abuses by the state. But notwithstanding all the positive work done by such groups, in the course of time these came to be increasingly identified with the PWG because of their silence over the killings and other violations of human rights by the militants. The credibility of the existing civil rights groups being badly eroded, the need arose for a civil-society organization which, while keeping a sharp eye on state killings, would also condemn killings by the militants. It was to fulfill this need that the CCC was set up in 1997. This committee was the result of the intensive debate that has been going on in the civil space of Andhra society for over a decade now. In just four years of its existence, the CCC has been able to influence public opinion in favour

of ending both state and militant violence. The committee which has published two well-documented and well-argued reports till now has highlighted both the state and militant killings in Andhra, while at the same time acknowledging the socio-economic factors which have led to the rise of the Naxalite Movement. Referring to the killings by the state as well as by the Naxalites, the CCC says:

> While one death is as tragic and as meaningless as another; over a thousand persons were killed by Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh during the current decade, and almost as many has been killed by the state in police encounters during the same period. It goes without saying that the majority of those who lost their lives were poor and from the backward castes, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. As reports of violent deaths occur with nauseating frequency, people seem to have become increasingly insensitive and the society is getting progressively brutalized ('In Search of Democratic Space', Committee of Concerned Citizens, Hyderabad, August 1998)

The situation described by the committee has a frightening parallel with that of Assam where state killings in recent months have become far too common and civil society has become increasingly desensitized and marginalized. Referring to the Andhra situation, the committee says, 'The situation calls for what may be termed as citizens' intervention on behalf of the people and in favour of the people to explore ways of putting an end to such wanton wastage of human potential'. While defining its aims, the committee observes:

> The Committee of Concerned Citizens is an independent collective of individuals sharing a deep and common concern on this climate of violence, brutalisation and insensitivity ... the committee perceives itself as a part of a large democratic section of the society which is tired at being reduced to a mute spectator in the intervention in people's lives by the state and the revolutionary parties. It locates itself in a transformatory paradigm and considers a people's perspective should inform our understanding and interpretation of movements, events and instruments. It is in this larger backdrop that the committee is deeply concerned with the need to democratise the system and increasing the democratic space through the abatement of violence and accountability to the people.

The recent move by the Andhra Pradesh government to initiate talks with the PWG—a move supported by all the political parties—shows

how important a role civil-society groups, however small, can play in conflict situations. The talks may have run into certain difficulties, but the beginnings have been made and are sure to produce positive results. The success achieved by the CCC in Andhra Pradesh should be a pointer to other such groups working in the northeastern region of the country to make civil-society intervention effective and meaningful. Only then can a proper democratic space be created in Assam so that the civil society can make its presence felt. While every young man shot dead by the army or every jawan who falls to a militant attack is a huge wastage of human potential, it is the common people who suffer most during conflict situations. It is high time that civil society in Assam makes its presence felt and learned to intervene effectively to put an end to the climate of violence and restore the democratic credentials of society. Till now, the ULFA has rejected the state government's offer of talks and has set its own conditions. It has demanded that the talks be held in a third country in the presence of UN observers and that they cover the issue of Assam's sovereignty. These may be impossible terms for the government to accept. Even then, efforts must continue to create a situation where talks between the state and ULFA's armed opponents can begin. One has to recall the experience of Nagaland in this context. There was a time when the question of opening up a dialogue between the Naga underground and the Indian state just did not arise and all attempts ended in failure. Today the situation is so very different. And this is so not because of any major change in the perception of the underground but because of the highly positive role of the civil society of Nagaland. With virtually all the civil society groups in Nagaland insisting on a peaceful resolution of the Naga conflict, neither the NSCN (I–M) nor the Khaplang faction can risk derailing the peace process. There is every reason to believe that what has been possible in Nagaland with its experience of the longest insurgency in the country's post-independence history can also be possible for Assam. Therefore, it is imperative that at this stage, civil society in Assam should come forward to build up opinion against violence and prepare the ground for talks with the militant groups. And, to create the right climate for talks, the state must stop the roll call of the dead.

VI Asom Sahitya Sabha

I

Culture and Politics*

The Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS), easily the most important literary organization of the northeast, has just concluded its 49th annual session in Diphu, headquarters of the Karbi Anglong district. This is the second instance in the *Sabha's* 65-year-old history when an annual session, a huge unwieldy affair drawing thousands of people and delegates from all over the state and intended to be a show of the Sabha's strength, has been held in a hill district. The only other instance was the 1953 session in Shillong, then the capital of undivided Assam. The Shillong Session, however, was a thoroughly Assamese affair and the hill people had almost nothing to do with it. The session, the second after independence, was marked by direct government patronage, and the then Governor Jairamdas Daulatram and the Assam Cabinet were actively involved in the Sabha's deliberations. Since then, the Asom Sahitya Sabha has been enjoying continuous governmental backing and there have been occasions when the Sabha has acted almost as a government organization.

During the Emergency, the Sabha earned the ire of the progressive sections by virtually approving of government measures and honouring Emergency stalwarts in its annual sessions, while at the same time justifying its studied silence over the suppression of democratic rights by claiming to be a 'non-political' organization. Cabinet ministers and legislators of the ruling party have all long blessed the Sabha's annual meets. Government grants-in-aid totaling several lakhs of rupees every year and the granting of casual leave to government employees intending to attend the Sabha's annual meets have been accepted parts of government policy over the years. Even though the Sabha has been actively participating in the anti-foreigner movement, till recently, the

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government had neither withheld grants nor adopted stern measures against the office-bearers of the Sabha. The government's comparatively soft attitude towards the Sabha may have been dictated by its hope that the latter, judging by its past performance, would exert a moderating influence over the more militant partners of the Assam Gana Sang ram Parishad (AGSP)-All Assam Students Union (AASU) combine. It is worth noting in this context that in the entire course of the agitation till now not a single important functionary of the Sabha has been detained, although the Sabha's representative in the AGSP was one of its convenors. However, just prior to the Diphu session of the ASS, government declared that it was withholding its annual grant-in-aid because the Sabha was no longer a cultural organization but had turned into a political one. The government also cancelled the customary leave it had been granting to its employees to attend the annual session. Exhibition stalls put up in the Sabha's annual session by some government departments were closed down and steps were taken to prevent the Sabha from using government buildings such as schools to house its delegates. These measures evoked strong protests throughout the state and countless organizations came forward with donations so that the Sabha could hold the session without government money. The government's action was viewed by many, including the AASU, as yet another attack on the identity of the Assamese people by 'anti-Assamese bureaucrats'. Some well wishers of the Sabha, however, have welcomed the government action for it would help free the Sabha from government pressure and interference. Bhupen Hazarika, the popular composer-singer, declared in the open session that the government's withdrawal of grants was a blessing in disguise for the Sabha.

Faced with the protests as well as the Sabha's determined stand to manage without government funds, the state administration made a belated effort to undo the damage by declaring that it would release part of the grant on condition that the Sabha gave an assurance that it would not indulge in anti-government activities and would shun the company of 'anti-social elements', an obvious reference to the Sabha's partners in the AGSP. The Sabha straightaway rejected the government offer and declared that it would accept no grants with strings. Instead, the Sabha decided to raise a one-crore-rupee trust, a move designed to avoid further dependence on government favour.

Apart from marking the low ebb in the Sabha-government relationship, the Diphu session was different in some other ways as well from many of its earlier sessions. On this occasion the Sabha leaders seemed to have gone out of their way to assuage the feelings of the tribal people and to win their confidence. Although in his presidential address, Sitanath Brahmachoudhury stressed the need to accept Assamese as the state language in practice, yet he did emphasize the need to develop the tribal languages. (In the past two years the Sabha has geared up its efforts in translating and editing books in the tribal languages.) The earlier nostalgia about undivided Assam and a dominant Assamese language was absent and there appeared to be a healthy acceptance of the fact that Assam today is just one of the several constituents of the northeast. Tribal leaders of Karbi Anglong district actively participated in the session, the success of which was largely dependent on the contribution of men like Chatra Singh Teron, Chairman of the reception committee, who emphasized in his speech that the northeast was made up of seven partners of equal standing, and that there was no question of imposition of Assamese on Assam's hill people.

The main purpose of holding the session at Diphu was to get at least some sections of the hill people and their leadership involved and interested in the Sabha's programmes. Whether the Sabha has really succeeded in this and whether it has been, even if partially, able to neutralize the influence of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), the organization which claims to speak on behalf of the Bodos, remains to be seen. The ASS's growing political role becomes apparent from the President's annual address which not only dwelt with the problem of foreigners in the state but also emphasized that the Sabha would not allow Assam to be converted into a 'colony of India'. Defending the rights of the small states within the Indian Republic, Sitanath Brahmachoudhury demanded that the Centre should take steps to prevent a situation 'whereby small states would be wiped out or weakened'. While asserting the right of the Assamese people to fight for their cultural and linguistic identity, the Sabha President accused the government of trying to set up a new Sahitya Sabha 'with some litterateurs with Government following'. The Sabha President declared that, if necessary, yet another agitation would be launched 'to give a rightful place to the Assamese language and also for its wider use'.

The presidential address, which was sharply critical of the government, marked a strong departure from earlier such addresses. Another interesting feature of the Diphu session was the acknowledgement on the Sabha's part of its growing rift with the other constituents of the AGSP. It is widely known that for some time now the ASS has not been pulling on well with its partners in the AGSP. The Sabha's moderating influence was obviously disliked by some of the more belligerent AGSP members and this seems to have led to the expulsion from the body of the Sabha's representative, Jatin Goswami, one of the convenors of the AGSP and among its most influential members on charges which are yet to be made public. Ever since Goswami's ouster, the Sabha has adopted a low profile regarding the agitation although it has been taking part in the deliberations of the AGSP. The Sabha, in its recent session, discussed in detail the expulsion of Goswami and exonerated him of all the charges. It adopted a resolution in its open session expressing its displeasure at Goswami's expulsion from the AGSP and called upon the latter to revoke its decision. All this is bound to have a serious effect on the Sabha's relationship with the AGSP, particularly on the eve of another spell of agitation.

II

Retreat from Populist Politics*

Relations between the Assam government and the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS), the premier literary-cultural organization of the Assamese-speaking people, have hit an all-time low. It's been more than two years now since the Sabha fell from official grace when, on the eve of its 49th session at Diphu, the government decided to stop all grants to the organization on the plea that the Sabha was no longer a cultural organization but had turned highly political through its involvement in the anti-foreigner upsurge. At that time the Sabha leadership had reacted with courage and confidence born out of its involvement in the mass movement and had refused to he cowed down by the government pressure. It refused to oblige the government by giving an undertaking that it would desist from 'anti-government and unwanted activities'

* *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No 14, 14 April 1984.

and it declared that it would try to do without government assistance. Ambitious plans were also announced of starting a one-crore-rupee national fund with subscriptions from the people. Even while taking such a stand, the Sabha leadership had hoped that once a popular government was installed (those were the days of direct Central rule), the Sabha's confrontation with the government would end and the grants resumed. The Sabha was obviously too big an institution for any state government to ignore. But this was not to be. The February polls brought into power a government whose legitimacy the Sabha could by no means accept. Any overtures by the Sabha towards the Saikia ministry were bound to be looked upon an act of gross betrayal by large sections of the Assamese masses on whose goodwill the sabha was even more dependent now. Hence the deadlock continued. On the other hand, the Sabha's relations with the other members of the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP), of which the Sabha was an active constituent, had started cooling especially after the February bloodshed which clearly unnerved the Sabha's leadership and led to serious doubts being raised about the Sabha's direct participation in the anti-foreigner movement under the All Assam Students Union (AASU)–AGSP banner. Constituents such us the Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad and the Jatiyatabadi Dal came to view the Sabha with suspicion, especially because of the latter's resistance to the militant tactics preferred by the former. Just prior to the Diphu session, one of the Sabha's leading representatives in the AGSP was expelled. The Sabha, however half-heartedly, continued to be a member of the AGSP.

The Saikia ministry, for its part, refused to make any attempts to befriend the sabha and instead started patronizing its rival, the BSS. Thus, two years after the stoppage of government grants the ASS now finds itself in a serious financial crisis which has compelled it to abandon or keep in abeyance most of its publication programmes and annual activities such as writers' workshops, seminars, lecture-programmes, and literary awards. Every year the Sabha comes out with an impressive list of publications in Assamese and the tribal languages, and apart from conducting language-orientation classes for non-Assamese government officials, the Sabha has also been going ahead with plans to establish an Institute for Research in Assamese Studies. Since the 1970s, government assistance in the form of ad hoc grants and project-bound aid has ranged well over crore rupees. Over and above this, the government has

been assisting the Sabha liberally in its building programmes as well. In a recent letter addressed to the government the Sabha's secretary has stated that withheld government grants amounted to Rs 9.07 lakhs and publication assistance of Rs 8.89 lakhs. Moreover, the government owed the Sabha nearly Rs 5 lakhs in the form of building assistance already promised. Thus, the backlog amounted to well over Rs 20 lakhs. These figures show that the Sabha has come a long way from the days when it first received Rs 1,000 as financial assistance from the British government in 1927. This grant was discontinued in 1930 and restored in 1941 when it was raised to Rs 1,500. Today, the Sabha's activities are so tied up with government assistance that all the rhetoric of independent functioning notwithstanding, the Sabha would be reduced to a non-functioning body if such assistance were to be permanently denied; hence, the need to mend fences with the government.

Right from its inception in 1917, the Sabha has stood for government patronage in the field of arts and even in the days of fierce anti-British struggle, the Sabha stood out for its loyalty to the colonial government. Taking advantage of the non-political character of the Sabha, as laid out in its constitution, the Sabha office-bearers, who were mostly loyal government servants, kept the organization scrupulously free from Congress politics. Occasionally, however Congress leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan were associated with the Sabha as individuals and Phukan even chaired an annual session. The Sabha's loyalty to the British government even during the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements made it suspect in the eyes of nationalist writers and intellectuals and this is admitted by Maheswsar Neog, several times the Sabha's President and one of its illustrious members. Discussing the Sabha's total subservience to the British, Neog writes:

> A small batch of government servants was at the helm of the Sabha's affairs all through the beginning. A note of loyalty to the British regime may not, therefore, escape the year of the annalist ... We cannot say that the Sabha was considered as the forum only of people loyal to the British regime; but we cannot, at the same time, rule out the existence of a reservation lurking behind the minds of the nationalist leaders and workers of the country insofar as the Sabha was concerned. Not many of them were to be seen actively participating in the Sabha's Conferences, which never adopted a political resolution, having in the constitution of the Sabha decided it should not discuss "any political or

> communal matters". This hiatus between the nationalists and the writers representing, the Sabha continued its subdued existence till the dawn of India's Independence.[1]

With independence, the Sabha naturally shifted its sympathies in favour of the Congress government and succeeded in involving leading Congressmen and ministers in its activities. This was revealed in the first annual session of the Sabha held after independence at Shillong in 1953. The Shillong session was blessed by the entire Assam Cabinet and the Assam Governor played a leading role in it. From then on, it has been smooth sailing for the Sabha and gradually the dividing line between the Sabha and Congress tended to disappear on several important issues facing the region. The Sabha's strength grew and it emerged as the only such organization in the entire northeastern region. ASS functionaries were eagerly courted by the government and the Congress Party, and in 1958 the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee felicitated the then President and all living ex-Presidents of the Sabha at a public meeting at Guwahati. Meanwhile, the government-grants to the Sabha kept on multiplying. It was during this period of direct government patronage that the Sabha shed its 'non-political' stance and got increasingly involved in issues which proved to be of great significance to the entire northeast. As the Sabha elaborated its stand on the language issue and the economic backwardness of the region, it got involved in mass movements. During the popular agitation in 1956 over the demand for a refinery in Assam, the Sabha played a major role in mobilizing the public opinion. Then came the demand for the recognition of Assamese as the official language of the then undivided state of Assam. The language movement of 1960 was the Sabha's major baptism in populist struggles and since then it has never looked back. It must be said here that the popular struggles in which the Sabha gave a lead were confined mainly to demands directly linked with the Assamese-speaking population concentrated in the Brahmaputra Valley.

It is evident that the Sabha's language policy had the support of the Assamese ministers of the Assam Cabinet. As way back as 1950, the Sabha had raised the demand that Assamese be declared the official language of the state and that, barring the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Mizo Hills and Garo Hills, all schools should switch over to Assamese. In 1959–61 a strong movement was geared up primarily under the Sabha's leadership (the students of Assam did not have any powerful organiza-

tion like the AASU at that time) throughout the Brahmaputra Valley and this eventually led to the adoption of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 which declared Assamese to be the official language of Assam. The Sabha was also upset over the policy of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) administration which was gradually trying to replace Assamese with Hindi in the schools of the Centrally-administered territory. In 1956 the Sabha observed 'Assamese Language in NEFA Day' and delegations were sent to the NEFA to convince the tribal leaders of the need to retain Assamese as the link language. The Official Language Act of 1960 gave rise to serious misgivings in the minds of the different hill tribes of Assam and was one of the factors which accelerated the formation of the separate state of Meghalaya. The Sabha's rigid stand on the question of Assamese being recognized as the sole official language of the state went a long way in alienating the Khasis, Pnars, Garos, and the other hill tribes. Even after the emergence of Nagaland and Meghalaya, the Sabha persisted in its demand that Assamese be accepted as the link-language of the region. While the Sabha, in advocating the cause of the Assamese language, was acting within its rights as an organization devoted to the development of Assamese language and literature and the all-round development of the Assamese people, it was certainly not aware of the serious and devastating backlash that was to follow. A more imaginative language policy of the Sabha could, perhaps, have slowed down the alienation of the hill tribes from the Assamese people.

The Sabha's language policy also prepared the ground for the emergence of organizations like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS). Earlier, the plains tribes of Assam like the Bodos had largely identified themselves with the ASS either because they thought that the Sabha platform was wide enough to accommodate them as well or because they did not have any independent organization of their own. But the Sabha's stand on Assamese and the emergence of the small but influential middle class among the plains tribes speeded up the process of separation of sizable sections of these people from the Assamese mainstream. Even today, while the ASS greets the BSS as a fraternal organization, the former has serious reservations about the latter's demand that Bodo be accepted as an associate official language of the state. It was mainly because of the unimaginative language policy pursued by the ASS that the plains-tribals of the Brahmaputra Valley came to view the Sabha as an organization solely of people who had Assamese as their mother tongue. The

Sabha failed to see the negative consequences of its language policy and instead credited itself with having guided the mass movement over the language issue in 1960.

The language movement was not without its communal overtones and in several parts of the state violent incidents occurred. Wide-scale disturbances broke out all over the Brahmaputra Valley after the death in police firing of Ranjit Borpujari, a student of Cotton College, Guwahati. In many senses, the language riots of 1960 were a foreboding of what was to come in the wake of the movement over the foreign nationals' issue. Discussing the role of the ASS in getting Assamese accepted as the official language of the state, irrespective of the sentiments of the hill people who then formed a substantial part of the population of Assam, Neog says that this gave the Sabha a new image in the eyes of the Assamese people: 'Whether or not it could be said that the Sabha in spite of itself was infiltrating into the political arena, as alleged in certain quarters, these events have raised the institution in the general esteem and marks the start of another phase, when the Sabha began attracting crowds like the National Congress sessions and other political festivals.'[2]

In 1971–2 the Sabha led yet another powerful mass movement in the Brahmaputra Valley demanding that Assamese be made the sole medium of instruction at the college and university level. Once again, under the stewardship of the Sabha, students built up a mass movement, which turned violent at several places leading to deaths in police firings as well as communal violence. Both the Guwahati and Dibrugarh Universities subsequently adopted Assamese as the medium of instruction. But in the process, the fears and apprehensions of the plains-tribal people were further aroused. From them came the demand that English be retained as the medium of instruction and that they be given education at the primary levels in their own mother tongues. The over-zealous language policy of the Sabha was clearly going against the concept of a broad Assamese nationality and helped to sow the seeds of discord and suspicion which eventually grew to full bloom in the early 1980s, when the anti-foreigner movement was at its peak. The ASS was taken aback when literary organizations of the plains-tribals started securing government patronage and started eating into the one-time strongholds of the Sahba. It was only when the Sabha realized that these organizations led by the tribal middle classes were eroding

its spheres of influence among the Assamese tribals that it tried to set things right by emphasizing the need for the growth and development of the tribal languages and literature. But the trust between the Sabha and the plains-tribals had clearly been greatly affected and although the Sabha is today doubling its efforts to woo and assuage the tribal population, the move seems to have come a bit too late. Learning from the experience of the ASS, government-sponsored tribal literary organizations have started replacing the Sabha in many plains-tribal areas. The just-concluded session of the BSS was graced by most of the members of the Saikia cabinet and had all the appearance of a ASS annual meet. The ASS's vague generalizations about a composite Assamese culture encompassing all the tribal communities cannot cover the fact that its sphere of influence has been severely narrowed.

The ASS finally bid goodbye to its non-political stance when, in 1980, it joined the AGSP, the organization, which along with the AASU, was spearheading the movement on the foreign nationals' issue. During the first two years of the agitation which was marked by massive satyagrahas and bandhs, the Sabha through its more than 500 branches played an active part in mobilizing the people. But it also played a moderating role and its presence in the AGSP was viewed with some sense of relief by the government. As the agitation lingered on and chances of a settlement receded, the Sabha's relations with its partners in the AGSP began to sour. Its policy of both leading the movement and remaining in the good books of the government was not acceptable to its partners. It may be mentioned here that during the entire duration of the movement not a single important office-bearer of the ASS was detained by the government. Even at the height of the agitation the Sabha's representatives participated in government committees doling out literary pensions. A stage, however, arrived when in the face of severe government repression of the movement, the Sabha, however much it would have liked to dissociate itself from the AGSP, could not possibly do so. This eventually led to the stoppage of government grants to the Sabha. The Sabha was unnerved by the extent of the February poll violence and it is known now that the Sabha's representatives were not in favour of mounting a boycott to the polls. Today, the Sabha is in a dilemma. This was evident in the last annual session of the Sabha held at Bongaigaonin August, 1983. The presidential speech which emphasized the need of constitutional safeguards for small nationalities

like the Assamese, also emphasized the need for a return to peace and goodwill among the different communities of the state. The resolution on the anti-foreigner movement stated that the Sabha's participation was fully justified and that the movement was democratic, non-violent, and secular in character. But even while affirming this, the Sabha took an important decision. It decided to set up a 'Karma Parishad' to take its own decisions regarding the Assam Movement. This Karma Parishad would be directly responsible to the President and the Executive Committee of the Sabha and would maintain links with the AASU and the AGSP. The setting up of the Karma Parishad signified the virtual dissociation of the Sabha from the AGSP. Whereas, earlier all decisions arrived at by the AGSP by majority vote was binding on the Sabha, from now on the Sabha was free to chart its own course. In setting up the Karma Parishad, the Sabha leadership was guided by the realization that the Sabha's direct involvement in the anti-foreigner movement as a part of the AGSP needed to be reviewed.

The decision was also obviously prompted by the desire to mend fences with the state government. In a recent letter to the government, the Sabha's secretary while stating that the government decision to withhold grants would remain an indelible stain on the national life of the people, at the same time called for the removal of difficult ties created by possible misunderstanding. In practice, the Sabha is adopting a low-key approach to the agitational programmes announced by the sponsors of the movement and on several instances the Sabha remained indifferent. It has shifted its emphasis to matters like the preservation of Assam's archaeological sites etc. Till the outbreak of the movement on foreign nationals, the Sabha was functioning like a government department, though with a large measure of autonomy. The anti-foreigners' movement changed everything. Now, once again the Sabha is trying to set matters right for itself. It was inevitable that the Sabha led by a handful of Assamese middle-class intellectuals, would retrace its militant steps. Its official stand on the foreign nationals' issue notwithstanding, the Sabha, has, for all practical purposes, abandoned populist politics for the time being and is retreating into fields of 'socio-cultural' activity. The government is taking its time to read the signals, but they are there for everyone to see.

Notes

1. Maheswar, Neog, *Annals of the Assam Sahitya Sabha* (Jorhat: 1976), pp. 43–4.
2. Maheswar Neog, 1976, p. 44.

VII Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS)

Giving a New Edge to People's Protests*

The election euphoria within the ruling Congress Party is yet to die down and ruling party in Assam yet to die down and the government displaying a new sense of confidence, verging on arrogance, from the absolute majority it now commands in the legislature, little did one expect that it would be caught in the wrong foot so soon. One of the first steps that the administration took within a month of the swearing in of the new ministry was to clear settlements in the hills all around Guwahati. These settlements had started in the 1970s when Meghalya was formed and the capital of Assam shifted to Dispur in Guwahati. Ever since then poor people from the villages who have been migrating to the city in search of a livelihood have been progressively settling in the hills, affecting the natural ecology of the city. Successive governments have accepted the presence of these settlers who have been provided with approach roads, electricity, and even water connections and a large section of these have been regularly paying taxes to the municipal authorities. During the recent elections, the Congress went out of its way to woo the settlers and promised them land documents if they voted for the party. And vote they did, leading to a resounding Congress victory in all the seats in Guwahati and its suburbs. But once in power for the third term, the Tarun Gogoi government decided that

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evictions be carried out in some of the settlements. Though the stated reason for such evictions was to bring back the ecological balance of the city, the actual reason seemed to be to help some private firms set up multistorey housing complexes and hotels near the settlements. But the administration was caught off-guard by the intensity of the resistance from the hill residents who chased away the demolition squads with sticks and spears. Though they had been organizing themselves for quite some time under the banner of the 'Brihattar Guwahati Mati Patta Dabikaran Samity', but the real catalyst to the resistance movement was the entry of the Right to Information (RTI) activist and peasant leader Akhil Gogoi into the scene. Akhil, who was recuperating from a bout of illness at the Guwahati Medical College, decided to stand up for the rights of the hill dwellers who consisted largely of people from the lower rungs of society engaged in daily labour and odd jobs. The fear of displacement of people from their land because of big dams and the entry of global capital had for the past few years been a major issue in the state and the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) was seen by many as the only organization which stood up for people's rights. Hence, once Akhil Gogoi and the KMSS joined the fray, the people were galvanized into action and on 22 June 2011 thousands of settlers marched to Dispur to demand a stop to the evictions and the grant of land *pattas*. The protesters led by Akhil Gogoi demanded that an official of the rank of the Deputy Commissioner receive their memorandum but two hours passed with no response from the administration. Instead, the police carried out a lathi charge and fired tear-gas shells to disperse the demonstrators, many of whom were seriously injured. When this failed, they fired into the air and one particular police officer is reported to have fired directly at the crowd, killing three persons on the spot including a nine-year-old boy. Once this happened, the rally turned violent, police officers and their men were beaten up while several vehicles were burnt down or damaged allegedly by KMSS supporters. During the melee, three government luxury buses parked at a distance from the rally, were also burnt down, though the organizers and a section of the media have been insisting that this was done by supporters of the ruling party with the aim of discrediting Akhil Gogoi and the KMSS, whose earlier mass rallies and protests have been known for their peaceful, disciplined character. What has led credence to the involvement of Congress supporters in the burning of the buses was the fact that though the Dispur Fire

Brigade station was just a few hundred meters from the scene of the arson which was leisurely carried out for almost an hour, not a single fire engine was sent to douse the flames despite repeated calls. Nor was there any attempt by the police to stop the arson. Once electronic footage made this clear, doubts began to surface about the administration's role in the incidents which were initially viewed merely as a failure in crowd management by the law-and-order machinery. Not anticipating the change in people's perception that would occur through subsequent media exposure, the government started devising means to shift the entire blame for the violence and mayhem on the KMSS and its leader Akhil Gogoi.

The immediate civil-society and media reaction to the incidents of violence was largely one of condemnation of the violence and failure on the part of the KMSS and its leader to keep the crowd under control. Hoping to cash in on this, the Chief Minister retracted the assurance of talks with the KMSS which had been given by the Kamrup Deputy Commissioner the day before, and declared that the government wouldn't hold talks with the KMSS but was prepared to negotiate with other civil-society bodies and was seriously considering the giving of land pattas to those who have been living in the hills for 15 years or more. This was followed by the arrest of Akhil Gogoi on 22 June as he was addressing a press conference at the Guwahati Press Club. The RTI activist was not shown any arrest warrant and several bailable and non-bailable changes were slapped on him and he was remanded in police custody for three days. The KMSS called for a state-wide bandh to demand the release of its leader but, significantly, even before this announcement, spontaneous protests in the form of road and rail blockades took place in different parts right across the state. Added to this was the highly successful bandh on 23 June which brought life to a complete standstill in both the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys. Attempts by the National Students Union of India(NSUI) and Youth Congress activists to break the bandh failed miserably. The people's response to the bandh call and the support extended to the KMSS and its leader by the local media clearly unnerved the government and even before the three-day-custody period was over, the police produced Akhil Gogoi before the Chief Judicial Magistrate on the afternoon of 26 June. Surprisingly, there was no request for extension of the police custody. On the contrary, the police produced a bunch of medical reports, on the basis of

which the magistrate ordered that the peasant leader be kept in judicial custody and sent to the Guwahati Medical College Hospital and that he be produced only after complete recovery. But the police bandobast that took place while Akhil was being produced in court clearly showed how unnerved and panicky the administration had become. Barricades were set up on all the approach roads to the magistrate's court and movement of people strictly prevented. Despite this, hundreds of KMSS supporters turned up and kept shouting slogans from behind the bamboo barricades for the release of their leader. The preventive measures taken by the police clearly surpassed those adopted when the United Asom Liberation Front (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) leaders were produced for the first time in court. Initially, the press too was kept at a distance but after the magistrate's orders, Akhil Gogoi was allowed to make a brief statement in which he called upon the people of the state to fight not just for his release but against the big dams, corruption, and price rise. The message had gone to the government of Tarun Gogoi that public opinion was against the arrest of the KMSS leader and was unwilling to accept the government's version of the events. In securing this, the local electronic media played a leading role by exposing the government's authoritarian tactics. Suddenly, the new-found confidence of the government following its recent election victory was beginning to ebb.

Clearly, the arrest has boomeranged on the government. While Akhil Gogoi is recuperating in hospital under judicial custody, the KMSS has gone ahead with its protest programmes which include *jail-bharo* in which hundreds of KMSS supporters have been arrested throughout the state. Support for the KMSS demand for the release of Akhil Gogoi has also come in from civil-society organizations in the neighbouring states and there has also been a demonstration in New Delhi and other cities. But what is significant for the political scenario of the state is that several indigenous organizations including those belonging to the tea tribes such as the Asom Sangrami Chah Shramik Sanstha have expressed their solidarity with Akhil Gogoi and the KMSS. The Chief Minister during a press meet has accused the KMSS and its leader of having links with both the Maoists as well as with organizations like the Asom Chatra Yuba Sangha and the Chah Janajati Suraksha Samity, which he alleged were backed by the Paresh Baruah faction of the ULFA. When questioned by journalists, he tried to backtrack, saying that although

he had no direct evidence of such links, yet he inferred that such links were there. He even refuted the Home Minister Chidambaran's recent statement that there was no notable presence of Maoists in the state. Akhil Gogoi, however, has been consistently maintaining that his organization has never had links with the Maoists, though on occasion he has referred to his Marxist convictions. In an interview given last year to an Assamese daily, Akhil Gogoi had even dismissed the Maoist path as a 'shortcut' and said that the Maoists did not pay much attention to mass struggles. In the same interview he declared that the parliamentary Left was constricted by middle class ideology and that it was inappropriate to term these parties as communist parties. This disdain for the parliamentary Left has acted as a spanner in the forging of a united platform of struggle of the peasants and the working classes of the state. While it is true that the fortunes of the Left have been on a decline in the state for quite some time now and it has been virtually decimated in the recent elections, leaving it with no representation in the 126-member house, yet support from the Left sections would certainly add significantly to Akhil Gogoi's struggle which initially began with the exposure of the Public Distribution Scheme(PDS) and District Rural Development Agenies (DRDA scams through RTI interventions. It was from local issues that Akhil Gogoi would soon move to wider issues relating to the rights of people over their natural resources which in turn began with the rights of the forest dwellers to their land.

The birth of the KMSS in July 2005 was preceded by a three-year struggle by the peasants of the Doyang-Tengani region of the Golaghat district against eviction by the Forest Department. With a present population bordering 1.5 lakhs, Doyang and Tengani were parts of two reserved forests bordering Nagaland. People from different ethnic groups have been settling in these areas for decades. It was in the 1960s that the Assam government started carrying out eviction drives against the peasants, most of whom had come from flood- and erosion-affected regions. The evictions reached their peak in the early 1970s when a college girl died during the eviction and several people lost their lives in police firing. Initial protests against these evictions were led by the Socialist Party, with the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) [CPI (ML)] and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) too joining in at a later stage. When the Janata government, of which the Socialists formed a major chunk, came to power in the state in 1978, the Doyang area

was declared as de-reserved and public facilities were introduced. The story of the Tengani region which forms part of the Nambor Reserve Forest area is slightly different. Though here too people displaced by floods and erosion have come and settled for decades, the situation took a different turn in the early 1960s when thousands of flood-affected people from the Majuli island started settling in the reserve-forest area. Repeated government attempts to evict them failed. However, the government insisted that the settlers were encroachers and refused to de-reserve the area. When eviction drives reached their peak in the Tengani area in the 2002–03, the settlers formed the 'Brihattar Tengani Unnain Sangram Samiti'. Soon, the peasant organizations of the Doyang and Tengani areas came together and the 'Dayang Mukti Sangram Samiti' and the 'Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti' were born. Thus began the Doyang-Tengani peasant movement led by Akhil Gogoi, and it soon received wide-scale support throughout the state. In April 2005, the Assam Legislative Assembly finally adopted a resolution to give land settlement to the pre-1980 forest dwellers of the Doyang-Tengani region. This was followed by the setting up of a Special Task Force to expedite the land settlement. Later on, the KMSS extended the movement for land rights to the Nagaon, Dhemaji, and Golaghat districts of Assam which had the highest concentration of forest dwellers. It also extended the scope of the movement to demand land for the landless peasants, land pattas to all peasants, distribution of wasteland and land belonging to absentee landlords to the landless, and the implementation of the Adhiar Act. Soon the KMSS further extended its movement by organizing mass protests against big dams, floods and erosion, and corruption at the highest levels of government. In the absence of an organized voice of the opposition parties, the KMSS was filling the vacuum and Akhil Gogoi was emerging as the rallying point of many a mass struggle. He was clearly building on a long tradition of peasant struggle in the state and it goes to the credit of the KMSS that it has succeeded in building its movement cutting across ethnic divides. Some the factors which have helped the emergence of the KMSS may be said to be the virtual marginalization of the Left parties, the setback to the trade-union movement consequent to the rise of ethnic divisions, the disillusionment of the Assamiya masses with the Asom Gana Parishad and its brand of regionalism, and the failure of organizations like the AASU to espouse causes affecting the masses. The capitulation of the

main body of the ULFA and its appropriation by the state has added to the overall sense of defeatism of the people. Thus, Akhil Gogoi and the KMSS may be seen as an alternative voice of protest in a situation where neither within the legislature nor outside the opposition has much of a voice. But it remains to be seen whether the wide-scale public support on issues that directly affect the masses can be translated by the KMSS and its leader into an alternative political platform with a clear agenda of its own. Many believe that if the KMSS, with its loose organizational structure and dependence on a single leader, moves away from its main plank of peasant struggle and keeps on expanding the parameters of its movement, then this might ultimately prove to be a hindrance. But for now, Akhil Gogoi-led KMSS has added a totally new dimension to the political scenario of the state, not only by challenging the hegemony of the ruling Congress Party but also by giving a completely new edge to the politics of mass protest.

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VIII Representative Democracy and Traditional Institutions

While reflecting on the political and social processes that have occurred in this region which is quite often described these days under the umbrella connotation of the 'Northeast', one is quite often struck by the fact that in the entire nation-building process that has taken place in the past six decades and more since independence, the course of events in this region has not only posed major challenges

to the nation-building process but has also added to new interpretations of nationhood and nationalism contributing substantially towards the overall experience of the Indian nation. This is what one may refer to as 'India's northeast experience'—an experience made up of grave challenges to the nation-state and compelling the latter not only to take note of happenings here but also to expand its own parameters of the nation-state and ideas of nationalism. In short, the events that have been unfolding in this region have been adding to the experience of the Indian nation-state and no account of the nation-building process could ever be complete without taking this into account. It is a pity that only in recent years, serious theoretical attention is being given in certain academic circles to this and the entire process of federalism in the country is being reassessed in this light. It is unfortunate that the violence that has marked this region in the past few decades has overshadowed many of the sociopolitical issues that have been thrown up in relation to the entire federal experiment in the country and has led to some major questionings of the Indian democratic system.

In order to arrive at an understanding of these questionings, one would have to go back somewhat in history to those momentous years preceding independence and the apprehensions and fears of the small nationalities of this region. It may be recalled that the colonial state had initiated certain measures regarding some of the small nationalities, particularly those belonging to the hill regions, which though apparently aimed at protecting their rights, were actually measures meant to make it easy for the British administration to administer this difficult and rather complex region. The different legislations making certain areas protected areas and the introduction of restrictions of entry for people from the plains were actually part of the British policy of not extending their administration and governance to areas that were not considered profitable. This is amply reflected in the attitude of the colonial administrators towards the extension of British administration into the Naga Hills. There are numerous other examples. These measures were meant to help the colonial extractive processes without investing in areas that couldn't provide enough revenue. By allowing the small ethnic communities in the hills to live according to their traditional laws and customs, the British were following a policy of expedience and not a policy of respect towards these people as is often made out to be because, wherever their trade and commercial interests were threat-

ened, they moved in swiftly to impose their will and their administration. There was another dimension to these measures which created protected areas and un-administered areas. When the freedom struggle under the Indian National Congress began and took its due course, these areas were almost left out. Hence, the people of these regions were virtually not covered by the anti-colonial struggle and, when independence came they were not psychologically prepared to become part of the Indian nation. It is but natural that some of them expressed their apprehensions at becoming a part of the new Indian nation-state.

In order to allay these fears, the new Indian nation-state initiated certain constitutional provisions which were seen as affirmative measures aimed at safeguarding the rights of these small nationalities/communities. First, there were the constitutional provisions of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. This was followed by attempts at creating political and territorial spaces for the small nationalities, beginning with the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1961. Although the creation of this state did not put an end to the Naga Movement, yet for the first time in the history of the nation-state there was an acknowledgement of the rights of a small nationality in the form of rights to tradition and custom and rights to natural resources. One may refer to the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution of India which, for the first time in the country's post-independence history, expanded the parameters of the Indian nation-state to acknowledge a particular small nationality's rights to their 'land and its resources'. Secondly, in what was perhaps a major change in the nation-state's position, it acknowledged, even if indirectly, the 'national' content of the Naga struggle by agreeing to create a separate constituent state of the Indian Union. These measures clearly suggested that the Indian nation-state was trying to expand its parameters by including the rights of the small nationalities. This, in turn, marked the beginning of the acceptance of the existence of alternate nationalisms within the broader framework of Indian nationalism as it had emerged out of the freedom struggle. This acceptance was also part of the gradual realization that India was, in effect, a multinational, multi-ethnic state with a constitution that could be amended from time to time to accommodate the wishes and aspirations of the small nationalities. This was indeed a major learning experience for the Indian state and it was followed up by creation of more and more political and territorial spaces for many of the other small nationalities as was evidenced in the North-East

Reorganization Act of 1971. But along with this learning experience, new problems have emerged which are bound to pose challenges to the entire effort of nation-building.

All this naturally leads one to the question: Has the creation of new political and territorial spaces in the form of ethnic homelands and the constitutional provisions regarding the traditional structures of power helped to solve the problem of alternate nationalisms, community consciousness, and the rights of the individual citizen? It is in the nature of contradictions that a particular measure aimed at solving one issue is quickly followed by the emergence of newer contradictions. In the case of the northeastern region, the creation of political and territorial space for one particular small nationality has not been the end of the problem. Rather, it has been the beginning of other problems centred on citizenship rights and representative democracy. This is especially so because of the heterogeneous and complex nature of the region where the process of different communities moving towards becoming nationalities is still on. The mix of ethnicity and territoriality in the northeastern region has led to a highly volatile situation and the Indian state is clearly unprepared for it. While the creation of new political spaces brought in initial dividends for the nation-state as also for the respective small nationalities, yet it created a large segment of people who were pushed to the status of second-class citizens because in the new political spaces they were not allowed to be active participants in the nation-building process. While the rights of some were given constitutional recognition, the rights of other sections were marginalized. In a democracy, citizenship does not only entail just some rights which the citizen carries with her/him, it also entails active participation in the democratic process. It is this second aspect of the right that stands marginalized in many parts of the northeastern region. This is one of the major challenges to the democratic process that arises in this region today. Can the Indian nation-state go on creating more political spaces for the ever-emerging new small nationalities without creating more areas of tension? The challenge today lies not just in accepting the rights of certain small nationalities but in working out an arrangement where the rights of the individual citizens would not be compromised in the name of protecting ethnic rights. How the Indian nation-state would go about this remains to be seen.

That takes one to the next part of the discussion which deals with the relationship between representative democracy, citizens' rights, community rights, and traditional structures of power. First, let us consider the issue of representative democracy and individual rights in relation to community rights as enshrined in traditional power structures. Whatever its limitations and whatever its distortions and aberrations, we as a nation have opted for representative democracy which was marked by individual rights and distributive justice. It involves the active participation of its citizens, through franchise and other means which may include participation in demonstrations and rallies, initiating judicial intervention etc., in the process of government. But the creation of exclusive ethnic spaces is bound to subvert this aspect of citizenship as far as that segment of the population which is not included in the community/nationality is concerned. Moreover, the exclusivist nature of ethnic movements ensures that large segments of the people who are outside the ethnic group are not fully involved in the democratic process. It is a pity that even those ethnic movements aimed at ensuring the rights of a certain small community/nationality have left little space for other ethnic minorities in their own areas, with violence and even ethnic cleansing often forming part of the exercise of creating exclusive ethnic territorial units. In the process, the human rights and the constitutional rights of large segments of people belonging to other ethnic communities is compromised and this is a major learning experience for the Indian nation-state. In this context it needs to be remembered that identities based on race, language, common heritage, and history are also quite often invented identities and are not static entities. For that matter, national identities are also not static identities and they could keep on either expanding or contracting, taking on new attributes. The exclusion of some segments of the population of a particular area inhabited by a particular dominant community leads to a vicious situation where the 'outsider' cannot participate in the community activities because he/she is not a member of the community and hence is compelled to remain an outsider forever. This is all the more true in the case of heterogeneous regions inhabited by several communities amongst which one or two are the dominant ones and secures the political space exclusively for themselves. By contrast, in homogeneous communities, the community collective can work wonders provided it is imbued with the democratic spirit which involves among other things,

gender equality and the equal rights of every citizen. Therefore, quite often the success of traditional structures of power is dependent on the homogeneous nature of the community. Whenever heterogeneity and multiculturalism come in, problems related to exclusion obviously arise, because as already said, the ensuring of the rights of the majority community through constitutional and other measures leads to denying in some form or other the rights of other communities residing in the region. Therefore, the question of citizenship, democracy, identity, and community rights is all inextricably linked and one cannot be discussed by excluding the other. It is this that the Indian nation-state must increasingly learn to address in the context of North-Eastern India.

Moreover, the failure of the democratic process and its inability to deliver distributive justice to the people has led to a situation where traditional structures of power are being seen as alternative models to democracy. Also, the failure of the constitutional provisions like the district councils to play a meaningful role in furthering the representative democratic process has led to demands for the revival of traditional structures of power represented by the village chiefs, many of whom hold hereditary power. In fact, the strengthening of these non-constitutional, traditional structures of power has been proportional to the failure of representative democracy to ensure distributive justice for the people. The more democracy has failed to deliver the goods, the greater has become the relevance of traditional structures of power and in recent times there has even been a growing demand on the part of traditional chiefs and rajas that their position and role be acknowledged through constitutional amendments. For instance, some years ago, at a conclave held in the town of Smit in Meghalaya, Khasi *Siyems*,Garo *Nokmas*, and Jaintia *Dolois* held a 'people's assembly' to demand legal and constitutional sanction to their traditional rights and privileges. Since then, such demands seem to be acquiring a degree of legitimacy. Such a trend has been noticeable also in other parts of the northeastern region where the glory of former chiefs and rajas is being recalled and often portrayed as part of the people's heritage and tradition. In some cases the impression is being sought to be conveyed that since democracy has failed to deliver the goods, maybe a return to past institutions and hereditary power structures could be a way out for the people. All this seems to be part of a wider effort aimed at retrieving the lost power and relevance of feudatory chiefs or rajahs and is indicative of well-

planned and concerted efforts to revive structures of power which are not compatible with democratic governance. And, yet all this is being done in the name of tradition.

It may be recalled that just prior to the country's gaining independence, many of these kings and chiefs had got together to demand autonomous status or even separate sovereign regions for themselves. But the spirit of the freedom struggle which released strong anti-feudal democratic sentiments contributed a lot towards marginalization of these feudatory chiefs and rajahs and prepared the ground for representative democracy. Following independence and the adoption of the country's constitution, provisions were incorporated to safeguard the customary rights and traditional institutions of the tribal people and, as per the Sixth Schedule, autonomous district councils came into being in the hill districts of then undivided Assam. These district councils, which were elected bodies, could have played an important role in reducing the power of the hereditary chiefs and rajas, and accelerated people's participation in the decision-making process. It is a separate story that the district councils have not been able to meet the expectations on which they were formed. Nevertheless, the major difference that marked the traditional 'people's assemblies' presided over by hereditary chiefs and the rajas and the district/autonomous councils was that while the former was 'consensual' in character, the latter was part of the overall process of representative democracy.

Indian democracy however, has been attempting to resolve this paradox by experimenting with the idea of a synthesis between customary rights and privileges as upheld by traditional structures of power, and representative democracy based on individual adult suffrage and the rule of law. Hence, one must always make a clear distinction between 'monarchical' and hereditary forms of power and that of the traditional institutions and structures existing in different forms in tribal societies. While the former has clearly outlived its relevance and is not at all compatible with the system of government that the country has opted for, yet there seems to be plenty of scope for some of our traditional institutions and structures of power to play a more meaningful role within the framework of representative democracy. This would require certain structural changes in these institutions which would make them compatible with the democratic process. Thus, traditional structures of power have also often been seen to be running parallel to the represen-

tative form of government without causing any hindrance to its working. Rather, the experience of traditional institutions has helped the people in some of the northeastern states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya to better adjust themselves to the representative form of government. The experiment at communitization in Nagaland, where village councils have been playing a very meaningful role in running the affairs of the community is a case in point. What is obviously being attempted is a synthesis of the traditional form which draws its strength from consensual and communitarian values, and the elected or representative form which is characterized by individual space, gender equality, and participatory politics. And to bring about a proper and effective synthesis it would be necessary to enlarge the scope and functions of the traditional power structures by bringing in gender equality and participatory politics. Therefore, reinventing and restructuring traditional institutions to meet modern needs is something very different from trying to give legitimacy to hereditary rajas and chieftains. If our democracy has not been able to nourish the values of participatory politics and distributive justice, then the remedy for these drawbacks surely does not lie in eulogizing the rajahs and their feudal structures of power in the name of reviving tradition and culture. Quite often the dividing line between revivalism and obscurantism seems to get dangerously blurred.

Finally, it needs to be remembered that while the Constitution of India provides for the safeguarding of the customary rights and practices of the tribal people covered by the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, it does not provide any such space to the traditional kings. Therefore, a clear distinction must be made between the constitutional privileges given to the tribal people and the 'rights' of the rajas and chieftains. But, today there seems to be a tendency to confuse the two and to see the 'people's assemblies' presided over by rajas and chiefs like the one at Smit as democratic institutions meant to defend the traditional rights of the masses. It is in this context that the defining line between constitutional guarantees for 'customary rights' of the tribal people and the monarchical rights and privileges of the rajas and chiefs must be made quite clear. One must also be aware of the apparent paradox between the 'consensual democracy' of the tribal assemblies and that of representative electoral democracy. There are no doubt strong points about communitarian life and collective functioning ingrained in traditional,

tribal institutions and these values are an asset in any democracy. But it must also be kept in mind that underneath consensual functioning there is often the tyranny of custom dictated upon by the chiefs and the rajas and this provides little space for individual dissent. Moreover, claims to egalitarianism run counter to the total absence of women in the decision-making process of the 'people's assemblies'. The opinion of the elders quite often passes off as the opinion of the community. Therefore, it would be erroneous to suggest that all tribal assemblies are essentially democratic in character and uphold egalitarian values. It remains to be seen as to how the modern democratic process maintains the balance between the contrasting pulls of representative democracy and traditional structures of power, between the rights of the individual and the concerns of the community, between the exclusive political and territorial rights of particular communities/nationalities, and the question of inclusive social space where each citizen irrespective of his/her ethnic loyalties would actively participate in the process of building a democratic nation state.

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Udayon Misra is former Professor of English at Dibrugarh University. His doctoral work on nineteenth-century British writing in India has been published as *The Raj in Fiction: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Attitudes towards India* (1987). Apart from his research in post-colonial literature, he has been writing extensively on society and politics of India's North-East. His publications include *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (2000).

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